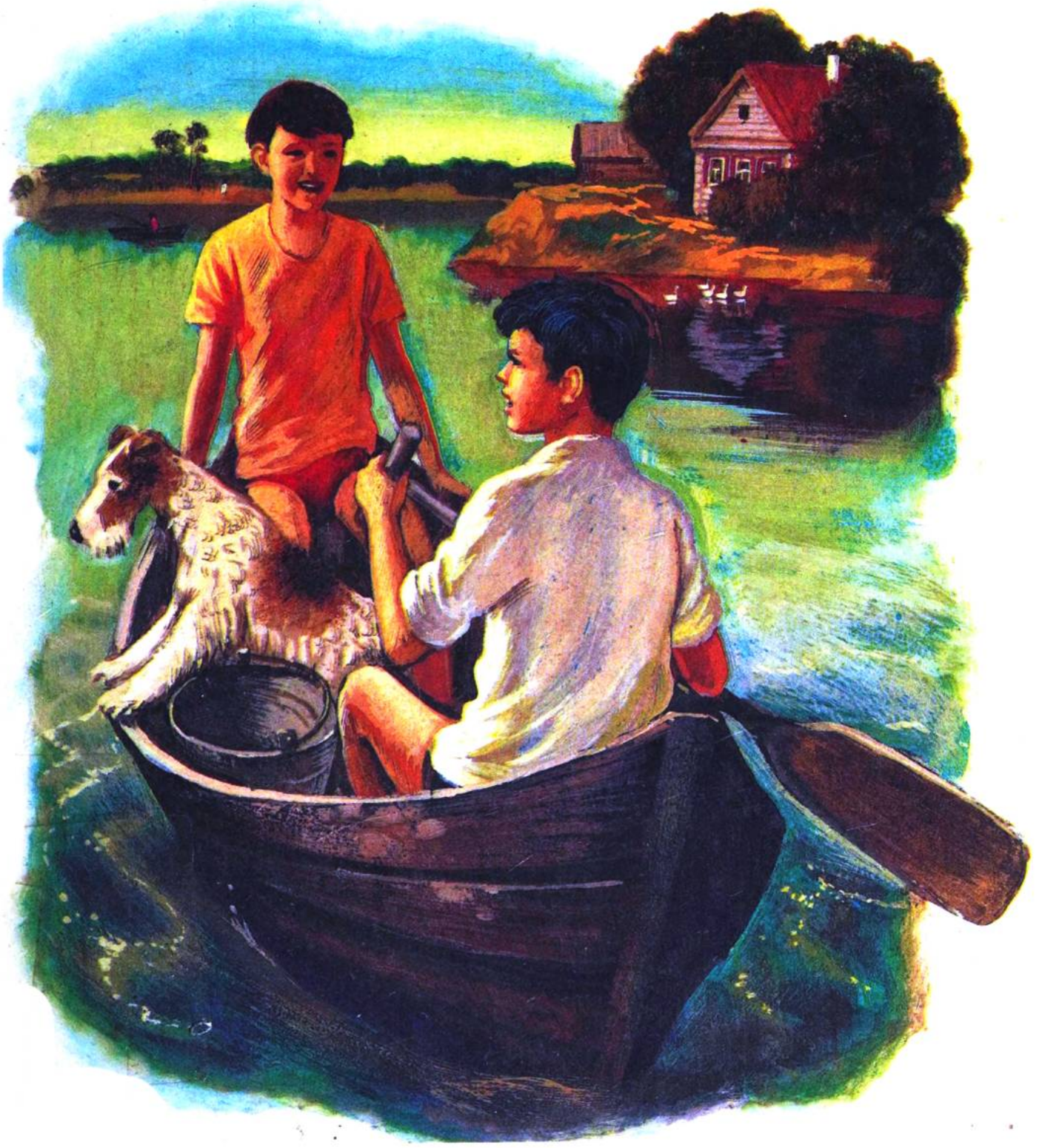
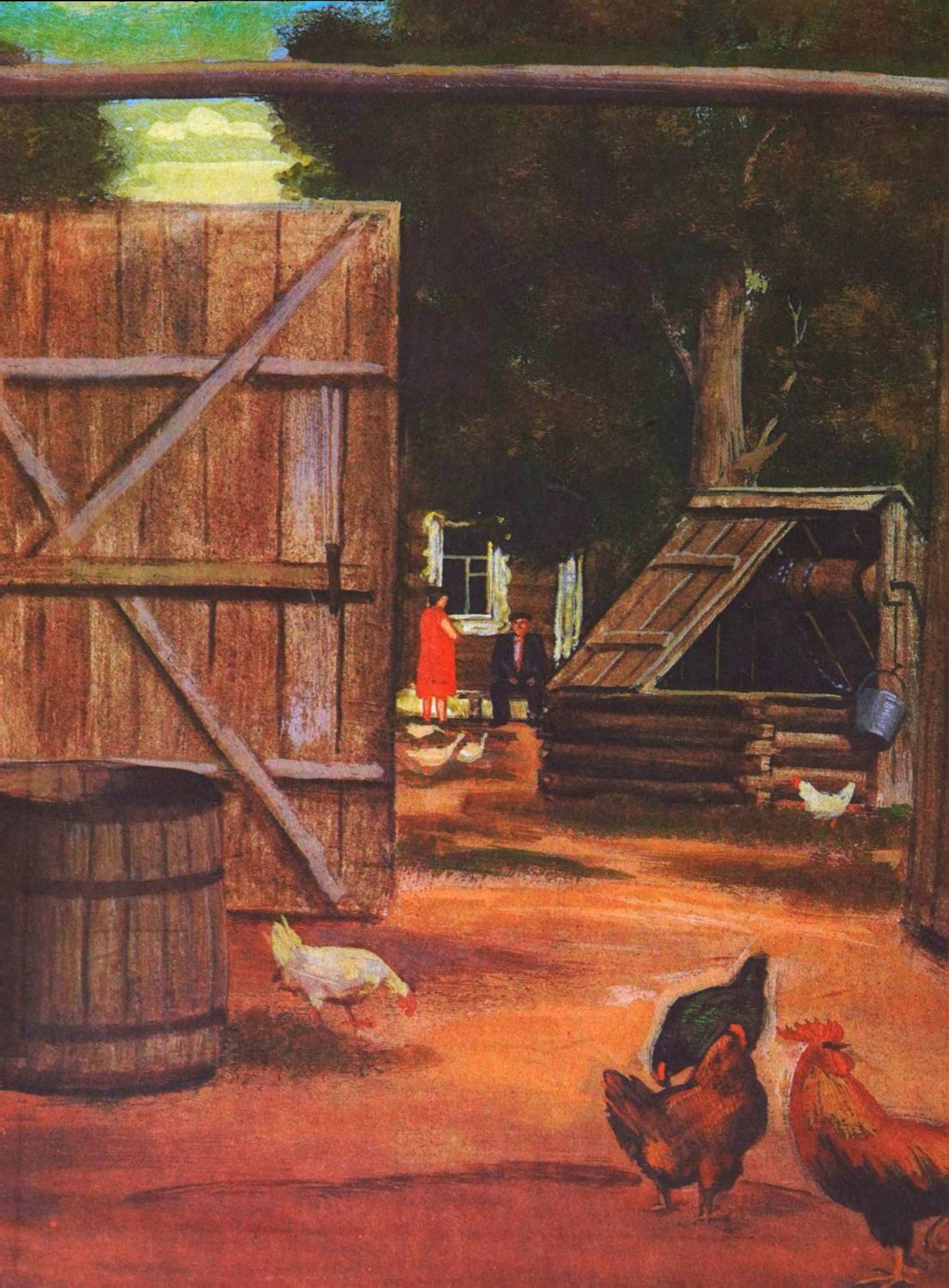
Tatyana Efimchenko-Evlakhova

CHIEF VASILY





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CHIEF VASILY

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WHATEVER WILL BE, WILL BE

I am in the sixth grade! School ended two weeks ago. The fifth grade is over for good. That's even what they wrote in my report card: "Promoted to the sixth grade." I ought to be dancing for joy or standing on my head, but I feel sort of empty inside. It's so hot you automatically start thinking about a river. A shower or bath can't compare with a real river. They are even worse than the rain: at least it comes from the sky, while the bath water comes from the pipes.

Peter sighed sadly, and his eyes fell on his bookbag. How'd you like that? Just lying there reminding him about school. He should put it in the closet so he wouldn't have to look at it, but that meant getting up off the chair. Another time. When the weather is so hot, it's cooler to sit still. All the doors and windows were open wide, but there wasn't even a little breeze. The heat probably made it lazy, too.

Suddenly the doorbell rang. Who could that be? All the smart kids left a long time ago: some to camp, others to a real sea with their parents. The campers were hiking through the woods and the others were swimming. Only the unlucky ones were stuck in the city!

The doorbell rang again. Peter didn't feel like getting up. "We have a crummy bell," he thought. "It makes an awful noise. I wonder who that could be? He's so stubborn. Anybody else would have decided no one was home and left long ago."

The bell blasted a third time. He couldn't concentrate when it was ringing. He'd have to answer. Peter sighed and trudged to the door. It was only Nikolai.

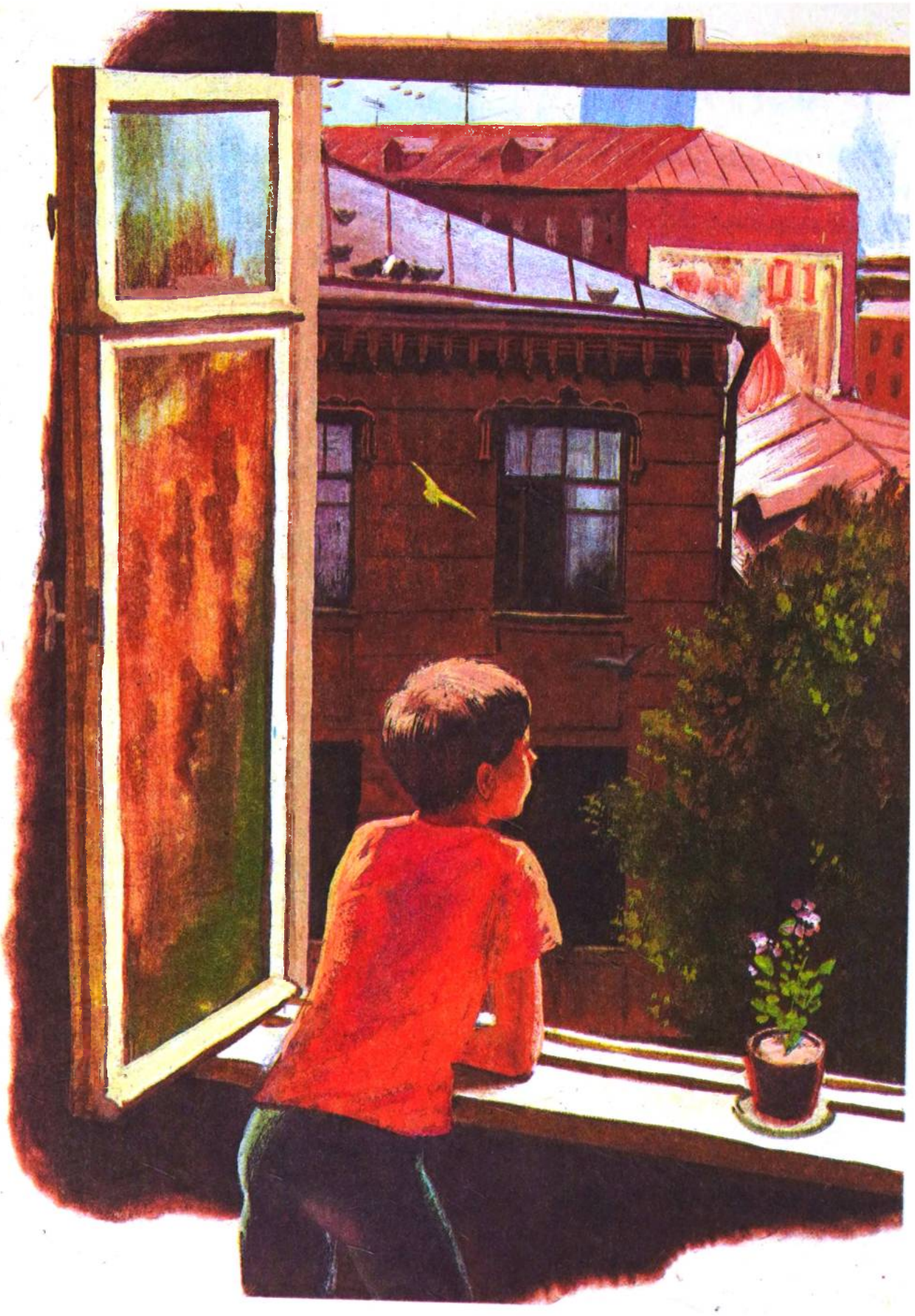
"What're you making all that racket for?"

"You're home? That's great!"

"Come on in. You ring everybody's doorbell that long?"

"Yeah. What are you doing?"

"Sitting here thinking."



"Come out and play soccer! We don't have enough guys. We'll have to let the girls play."

Peter looked at him sceptically. Nikolai was as red as a lobster, and streams of perspiration trickled down his dirty face.

"Something wrong with you?"

"No. I'm just sweaty."

"What kind of idiot plays soccer in this heat? Even real soccer games are held at night. Don't you know that?"

"But ours isn't real. We're playing with the kids from the apartment building next door."

"Are they all fanatics, too?"

"All of them. They only have one girl on their team, but we have three. Are you coming?"

"No way!"

"But you're worth three girls!"

"I told you, I'm not coming!"

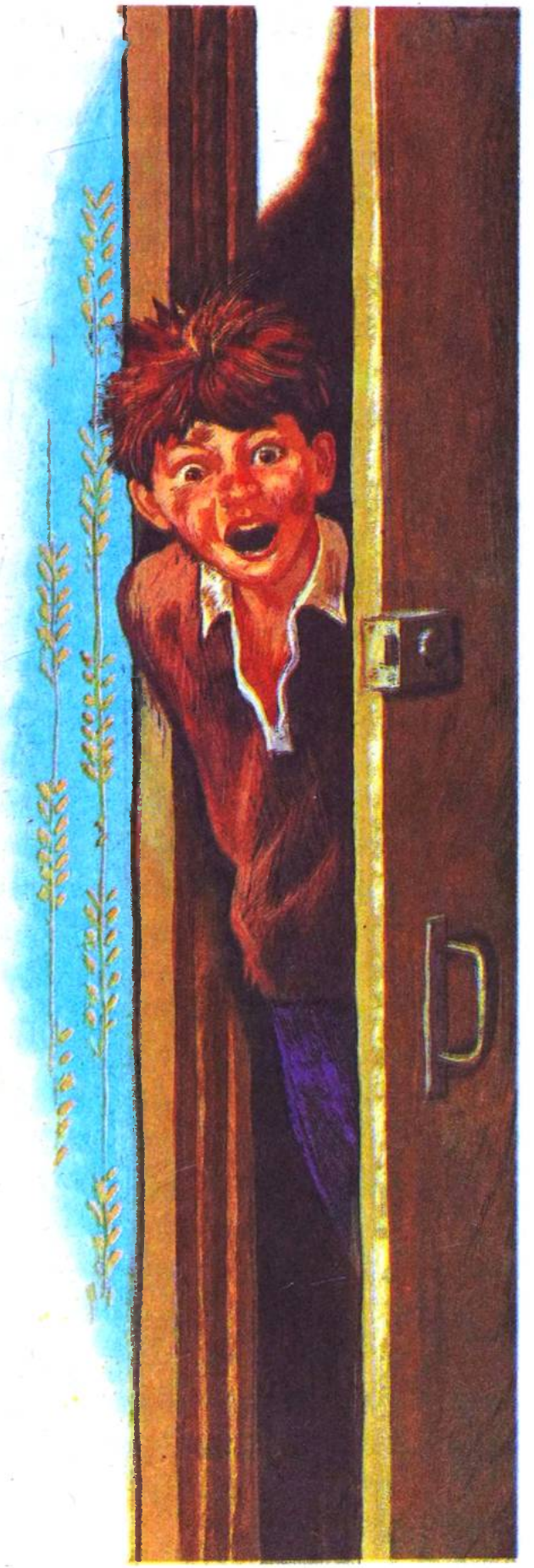
"Why are you so grouchy? Got a stomach ache?"

"Don't be stupid! My life is all discombobulated."

"It's what?"

Peter looked at his friend with a long-suffering expression.

"You see, all the smart kids left somewhere, but I'm still sitting at home," he said in a calmer, disappointed voice.



"All winter my father promised that we'd go to the country if I got good grades. I really tried."

"Is that the only reason you studied so hard?"

"No, but it spurred me on. Have you ever been to the country?"

"No."

"I haven't either. But my father is always called away on business. Mama's right when she says: 'you aren't like other people.' She's talking about my father, not me. He's forever doing everybody else's work. And I believed him and didn't go to camp. So here I am, stuck at home."

"Don't go making plans ahead of time. Valentine Chizhik is right: don't count your chickens before they hatch. I know from experience. For example, if I decide to go to a movie on Sunday, either my folks don't give me the money, or they don't give me permission. They say I have to stay home and do my homework, as punishment. They are great at thinking up punishments."

"That's not scientific proof. Just a coincidence. There must be a reason they sing '...your dreams come true.'"

"Some people's come true, other people's don't. You can't trust songs. They write them to sound nice. In life, it's just the opposite: I came to ask you to play soccer and you start talking about science..."

"It's not science's fault. It's just too hot.

Despite the heat, their discussion of the scientific character of planning might have gone on indefinitely had not Peter's mother come in.

"What are you two arguing about?"

Nikolai leaped out of the chair in which he'd been reclining, and brushed off the sand and burrs.

"I'm sorry, Maria Antonovna," he babbled apologetically. "Hello, if you please."

"Why if you please?"

"I didn't expect you. I've just come from the playing field..."

"I see. A real beauty. You need to be scrubbed from head to foot." Then she turned to her son.

"Why are you so gloomy? Won't they let you play?"

"Just the opposite. They begged me."

"Then show a little enthusiasm."

"Let Nikolai show enthusiasm. I'm not in the mood."

"I have just the thing for bad moods. But it's to be given only to those who show some enthusiasm."

Only then did Peter notice that his mother's face was mischievously cheerful and pretty. Maybe there was something from his father.

"From Dad?"

"Read this."

Peter grabbed the telegram, read through it once very quickly, and then a second time more slowly.

"Listen to this!"

Bursting with pride, he began to read slowly and with feeling, just like a television announcer:

"Congratulations on finishing fifth grade. Pleased with your grades. Delayed. You two go alone. Details in letter. Love, Dad."

Peter held the telegram as if it were a precious treasure, and looked at Nikolai triumphantly.

"What did Chizhik say: don't count your chickens before they hatch? No scientific theory, that's for sure!"

Nikolai looked at beaming Peter, then at Maria Antonovna who was smiling at her son, and for no reason whatsoever answered in an unpleasant, envious voice:

"So you got a telegram, big deal. It's just a little piece of paper. That doesn't mean you're going."

"If Dad wrote it, then it's all set. You can bet your life on it."

But Nikolai couldn't back down now. He had burned his bridges. So he continued, his voice turning nasal:

"Well, go to your crummy little village. Some vacation! I may be going to the Crimea! That's a lot better than a bunch of mosquitoes and flies."

He wasn't telling the truth about the Crimea, and he blushed so red that you could even see his cheeks under the dried rivulets of dirt.

"At least my village is real, but you just made that up about the Crimea out of envy."

"Me? Out of envy? I just didn't tell you before so you wouldn't feel bad. We already have reservations."

Maria Antonovna's patience reached its limits, and she interrupted the naive, childish argument:

"Stop this minute! You should be ashamed of yourselves. It's as if you are bragging to each other about who has the best toy. You should be going to kindergarten, or even nursery school in the fall, and not the sixth grade."

"Well, what's he knocking the country for..."

Nikolai, realizing the battle was lost and he should retreat, nevertheless laughed unnaturally:

"The country! You couldn't pay me to go there!"

"And who wants you there? Go play soccer!"

"I'm going."

"Good riddance!"

"Have a nice vacation," Nikolai said, already at the door, and he bowed low, scoffing. "Don't forget to bring back some dung flies for our zoology class!"

Peter stared gloomily at the door. His good mood had been ruined and his excitement dampened. Oh, Nikolai, you spoiled all the fun. And you're supposed to be my friend. In school they call us bosom buddies. Inseparable. We sit next to each other and copy off each other. But is that real friendship? A real friend should understand. Sure wouldn't want to be stuck on a desert island with him. But maybe his feelings are hurt. He has to stay behind in the city while I'll be swimming in a river. But all the same, he should be happy for me, and not upset. If he had gone to the Crimea like he made up, and I was boiling at home, I would have been glad for him: at least one of us would be having a good tme. Boy, I'd sure like to know what that village is like. If only we'd leave soon!

DEPARTURE

The letter from Peter's father arrived. He had rented a room and it was already paid for. Peter read the letter for a third time: "...The countryside is beautiful. The hills are full of trees and green fields are all around. There is a marvelous little river not far from the village. I've already made arrangements about a boat. Peter can take it any time he likes. The important thing is for you to have a good vacation and build up your strength for the coming school year. Don't be a coward, but don't take unnecessary chances! The river is unfamiliar, and the forest is dense, you could easily get lost. Don't go far alone. They say the kids there are fine fellows. Try to make friends. Well, take care..." His father continued on about love and kisses, but that wasn't important.

"My Dad is all right," Peter thought. "Just perfect. Well, maybe a little sentimental, but that's Mama's influence. We men should be stern and unyielding. Women can be mushy, but not us. Going to a hockey game with Dad, or learning to box, that's men's stuff. Boy, if only he were going with us, he'd show me a new move in sambo-wrestling or judo, and teach me all the swimming strokes. It's no fun to take a vacation without Dad. Well, it's still fun, but it would be even better with him. Who keeps thinking up all those awful business trips?"

"Peter! Peter!" his mother called from the doorway, out of breath from walking fast. "I managed to get tickets on the boat. We leave tomorrow morning! Run to the vet and get a certificate for Lord, otherwise they won't let us on the boat. I had to plead with the captain to allow us to keep him in our cabin. He agreed, but on the condition that if the dog behaves badly and disturbs the other passengers, we will all have to get off at the first stop. If that happens, we'll have to hitch rides. So hurry!"

Peter's mouth dropped open in surprise, and he remained rooted to the spot.

"Take Lord and go, otherwise you'll be too late!"

Peter was gone in a flash. In one second he had put on the dog's collar and leash, and raced out the door. Lord ran down the stairs first, of course: he always had to be first. Lord was a fox terrier. The best dog in the whole world, according to Peter. There is a reason why they say four fox terriers can bring down a lion. Peter didn't know about lions, but they use fox terriers to lure bears out of their dens. They have no sense of fear, and aren't scared of anything. What's a fox or a badger? He'll even take on a wolf. They have the hunting instinct, and attack all animals except man. Man is their friend, and they think all people are good. Foolish owners of big dogs often walk their animals off the leash. They think no one will bother their dogs. You can explain until you're blue in the face, and they even let their animals off on purpose. Well, sometimes Peter let Lord off the leash, though he knew it was not the dogs' fault, but their owners needed to be taught a lesson. Lord immediately scares stiff any mastiff or great dane, or bites their lip and won't let go. Then even the densest people realize what's what, and begin to shout at Peter to take away his "wild animal". They should have thought about that earlier when they set their's on to fight. All the dog owners in the neighborhood knew Lord. Fox terriers can distinguish forty thousand different smells, and that's why they are used to sniff out narcotics in this country and even by Interpol. But they are stubborn. Well, not actually stubborn, but independent: in that bear's den they have to make all the decisions themselves, since nobody's giving any commands. So if you tell Lord to do something, first he thinks about whether it's worth doing.

It wasn't far to the vet: just two bus stops. But Peter and Lord flew at a gallop. The pedestrians even threatened to call a militiaman. Finally they reached the vet. Peter turned the handle, but the door did not open. It was locked. What should he do? He began to beat on the door with his fist until it hurt, but he kept knocking harder and harder.

"Who's there?" a displeased voice came from inside.

"It's me. Open the door, please! Hurry!"

"Who's me?"

"Peter Kruglov."

"Peter must be an important person."

"I am."

The door opened unexpectedly, and an old man with a white moustache appeared.

"Let me look at this important person. Well, you're just about as important as they come. What are you banging for? Can't you see we're closed?"

"I see, but I need a certificate, Doctor. We're going to the country for vacation, and they won't let us on the boat without a certificate. You understand?"

"Who's going on vacation? The dog?" The old man snickered in his moustache, and buttoned his gown importantly over his flat stomach. "Go back where you came from. We're closed today. Come back tomorrow."

"Doctor, please listen," Peter implored. "It's not his vacation but mine. We already have tickets for tomorrow."

"I don't care if you have tickets for tomorrow. I told you we're closed, and that means we're closed."

And the old man began to shut the door. But before he could, Peter grabbed the handle and began to yell at the top of his lungs.

"I'll write a complaint! Wait a minute! Listen to me!" and he tried as hard as he could to hold the heavy door.

Lord, deciding that the two people had thought up a new game, joined in enthusiastically. He began to bark loudly, wagging his tail, and trying to grab the old man's pant leg.

"What's all the noise? I've never heard such an uproar!" a young man in a white cap who appeared from behind the old man's shoulder asked. "What seems to be the trouble, Uncle Vasya? Have they ganged up on you? Two against one?"

"That young fellow is a real trouble-maker! Says he's an important person! Peter Kruglov! Expects us to give him a certificate when we're closed."

"But you see, we already have tickets for tomorrow," Peter said, almost crying. "The boat leaves in the morning, and we don't have a certificate. They won't let him on without the right papers. Do you understand? I ran the whole way here for the certificate, and he won't let me in."

The young man straightened his white cap, and winked at Peter gaily:

"Well, if you ran the whole way, then we should admit you. I'll see if I can give you that certificate. Bring in your friend. What's his name?"

"Lord."

"Who thought that up?"

"I did."

"And is your Lord a pedigree?" the doctor asked with a smile.

"He sure is! He's got a long family tree. All his relatives have names beginning with von. My Dad says that one of his ancestors came from Goethe's dog. He's registered with two societies: a hunting one and a show one. Only we don't take him to obedience classes and don't show him. We don't have time. But now I will, I promise!"

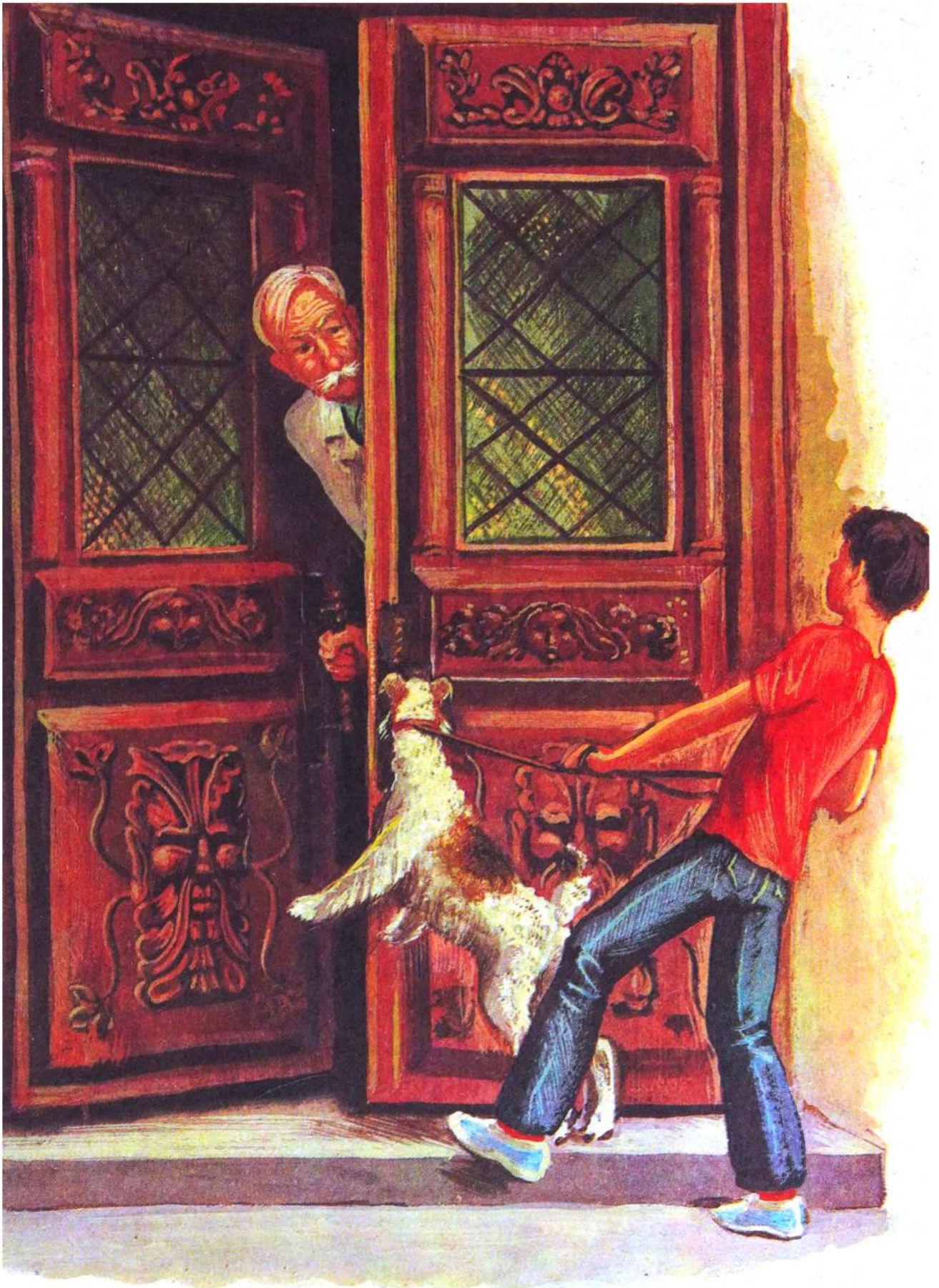
While Peter talked with inspiration about Lord's relatives, the veterinarian checked his records to see if the dog had all his shots, touched the cold, black nose, bravely opened his jaw with it's huge fangs, peeked in for some reason, and then felt different parts of the motley fur. Lord stood there obedient and patient, as he should at the vet, and did not growl even once.

"That's all. You can take that boat trip. And your Lord is really a fine animal. I'll write that certificate now."

"Right now?" Peter shouted happily. "You know, that doctor in the gown is really mean," he said in the vet's ear. "He doesn't understand a thing."

"He's no doctor, he's our watchman," the young man said. "And that's his job, to keep order. You disrupted things."

"I didn't really want to, but I had to because of Lord.



Why don't you come see us sometime. You're a dog doctor, and my Dad loves dogs more than anything else in the world. He says if there were no people on earth, then it would be a dog civilization."

"I'm no dog doctor," the young man laughed. "I am a veterinarian, and I care for all kinds of animals: cats, and parrots, and squirrels. And do you know, they are all kind-hearted in general. There are some which have become frightened and mean because of people's mistreatment but even they respond to affection. So, I don't know what kind of civilization that would have been."

"Come see us anyway. We don't live far from here, only two bus stops. And when my Dad gets back from his trip, we'll come see you ourselves."

"Fine, you do that," the vet nodded. "Only don't forget your certificate."

"I'd never forget that!" Peter exclaimed gratefully, and he grabbed the paper and headed toward the door with a satisfied Lord. "Thank you very much!"

"A fine boy," the veterinarian said, and looked at the old man with a smile. "You know, he called me a dog doctor and you simply doctor."

"They're all fine when they're asleep," the watchman muttered. "An important person! Still wet behind the ears, and he starts demanding. If you're told the place is closed, that means it's closed. There has got to be order."

"You're right, we have to have order. Things would be a mess without it. But there also should be exceptions to the rule. You are inflexible."

"I'm not paid to be flexible, but to keep order!"

The veterinarian smiled, and began to wash his hands thoroughly.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

"Peter, wake up, you sleepy head! We'll be there in an hour!"

Peter opened his eyes and saw his mother. He had no desire to get up: it was chilly and the noise of the boat moving through the water was like a lullaby.

"Are we really there?"

"We'll dock soon, and you are still in bed! We barely have time to eat breakfast and get our things together."

"Lord, get up right now! Do you hear me, you sleepy head?" And Peter stretched with pleasure on his bunk.

Lord gave a big yawn, stood up on his paws, and looked at his owner disapprovingly.

"What's the matter? You seasick? What a weakling! What if there was a storm at sea? Then how'd you feel. Straighten up that droopy tail, right now!"

Peter leaped from his bunk and pounced on the dog, but his mother stopped them immediately.

"Quiet, you two rascals! You'll wake up the people in the other cabins. They're still sleeping since they have further to go. And I promised the captain, remember?"

Peter unwillingly released the dog, who was just getting wound up for the wrestling match, picked up his toothbrush, soap and towel, and still yawning and stretching, went to wash up.

He ate a quick breakfast and then helped his mother pack their things. Then he and Lord had a race to the deck. It was quiet and empty. The last wisps of morning fog floated by in the cloudless sky. The sun hung low over the river, slowly rising along unseen steps. The river was calm and flowed briskly between the picturesque banks. The right bank was steep, with a dense forest, while the left was sandy and low, with a golden beach at the edge of the water. Not a leaf stirred on the branches, and the beautiful river reflected the sun's first gentle, golden rays.

A tugboat approached them, and the boats greeted one another by blowing their whistles. But that did not interest Peter. He

was absorbed in the wakening morning. Even if you drew everything exactly as it was, no one would believe it: they'd say nature isn't that gold. It would be great to be a boat captain, but even better to be an artist! He sees all the beauty of the world. His eyes are specially suited to see the beautiful in things. And he always gets up early each morning so he won't sleep through such a wonder.

A herd of cows passed, and a dog barked in the distance. Lord assumed a fighting position. Stupid animal! The dogs were on the shore, he'd never get them. They might as well be in a painting.

"Well, my thoughtful man, have we arrived?"

"Mama!" Peter started. "Are you here?"

"I've been here for a while, but where were you? You looked like you were a million miles away."

"Do you see how pretty it all is?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Really. It's very beautiful. But we 've arrived, you lunatic."

"I'm no lunatic. They wander around at night, but I like the morning."

"That's enough. It's time to come back to earth."

The dock came into view on the steep bank. There were boats tied to stakes, and some kind of long, thin, cigar-shaped boats like the Indians had, painted black, with no seats. Peter noticed those strange boats immediately, and wondered how you propelled them. Did you push them along with poles or row standing with special oars like in a canoe?

The boat whistle blasted loudly, announcing their arrival, and the bank suddenly came alive. First some little boys appeared as if out of nowhere, followed by women with earthenware pots, bottles, and baskets.

They let down the ship's ladder. Peter, his mother, and pompous Lord disembarked. A spontaneous market seethed around them, beckoning and attracting.

"Eggs! Eggs! Hot! Fresh! Hard boiled! Soft boiled! Pick your own!"

"Fresh milk! Baked milk! Come and get it!"

"Homemade pies! Fresh from the oven! Enough to fill any empty stomach! With meat! Onions! Eggs! Mushrooms! With potatoes!"

"And I've got a chicken! Who needs a chicken?"

Peter had never seen anything like that in Moscow. He was stunned and bewildered. Even Lord was confused, and just stood there looking all around.

"Why are they shouting like that? Who needs a chicken? And who could eat all those pies, even if he had an empty stomach?"

"You could eat all of them," his mother laughed merrily. "And they are shouting so the passengers on the boat will hear them: their goods are fresh and hot, and just begging to be eaten."

Peter looked back and sure enough, the cabin windows — excuse me — the portholes opened and sleepy faces appeared. The faces brightened and then disappeared. The movement on deck increased as the passengers hurried to the market.

And those little boys were racing about on the shore. Peter was again surprised: why weren't they still in bed? Hadn't they ever seen an ordinary boat before?

A blond, curly-haired little boy ran over to them:

"Where are you going? To whose house?"

"Don't get so close! Be careful, he'll bite you!" his friend warned, pointing to Lord. His friend was just as little and just as blond.

"We are going to the Kuznetsovs," Peter's mother said.

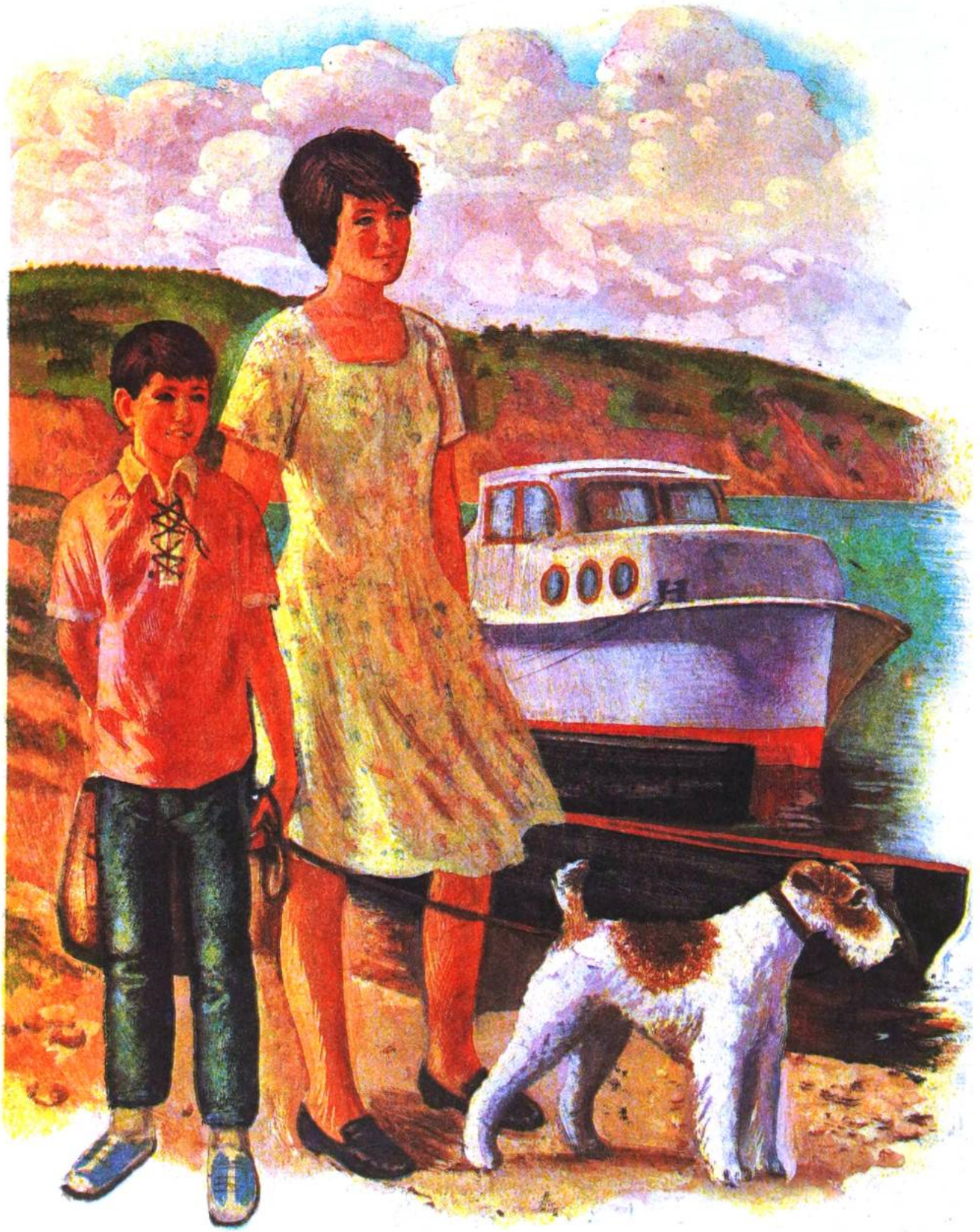
"Ahhh! That's not very far. I'll take you there."

"Ivan! Where are you going?"

"Where are they staying, Ivan?"

"At the Kuz-net-sovs!"

The children surrounded the new arrivals. You could even say a small crowd formed. Their faces were curious, interested.



They stared at them as if they were from Mars! Peter wondered if they always stared, or only at certain people.

"What's your name?" a freckle-faced little girl with a dirty and a faded blue bow, which had slipped almost to her ears, asked his mother.

Peter's mother smiled, and fixed the little girl's bow for some reason:

"My name is Maria Antonovna, and this is Peter."

She was right to give her own name, but no one had asked about Peter. Grown-ups always say more than necessary.

"And what's the dog's name?" the little girl asked.

"Lord."

"Wow! Did you hear that? Lord!"

You would have thought the kids were deaf or something. They all began to yell together: "Lord! Lord! Lord!"

The poor dog whirled around in confusion: who was calling him? The dumb animal didn't understand they weren't calling him, but just repeating the strange name. They would upset the dog.

Fortunately, Ivan stopped the performance.

"Let's go, Maria Antonovna!" he said proudly, feeling his responsibility for the visitors.

Peter's mother was about to pick up her plump suitcase, when Ivan stopped her self-assuredly:

"Wait. It's heavy for you. Come on, guys."

"Some commander!" Peter thought. "What's he doing giving orders? Who is he? Though it was nice to have someone looking after you, even when you didn't ask." There was no question of asking — a group of little boys had already hoisted the suitcase on their bare shoulders! Peter and his mother simply exchanged surprised glances. But the barefoot crew was already holding the suitcase as if it were a first prize. Blond Ivan gave orders to the porters in an authoritative voice:

"All together! Hold it tight! March!"

Why march? This wasn't a military parade, or a delegation meeting the head of government at the airport.

"Are we carrying it all right?" the little girl with the faded bow asked, as she ran alongside the group.

"It's too heavy for you," Peter's mother said, as if she had been waiting for the little girl's question. "I'll carry it myself. You'll get in trouble with your parents," she added, having found a convincing argument.

Ivan was keeping a strict watch on things:

"Oh no, Maria Antonovna. We always meet the boat at the pier," he said, and with a wave of his hand, he stopped her feeble attempt to take her suitcase from the proud bearers.

"Are you their leader?" Peter asked, envying that blond observer of local traditions.

"I am their chief," the little fellow said with dignity.

In Peter's opinion, that dignified look was too much.

"Their chief? What is this, some kind of tribe?" Peter put all the irony he could into that phrase.

"Hey, Manka, Natasha! Run to the Kuznetsovs and tell them their boarders are here. On the double! Do you hear?"

He was obviously showing off to Peter his boundless, autocratic power as chief.

The girls ran up the hill, their braids bouncing on their shoulders.

"Look at that discipline!" Peter's mother said in surprise.

"It's not discipline, but a drill," Peter muttered enviously. "A slave-holding system. No emancipation whatsoever."

Ivan either did not hear Peter's statement, or he ignored it. He smiled contentedly, and wiped his nose with his hand.

"We all have chiefs," he explained. "The little guys and the big guys. In my group, I'm the chief," he said, nodding toward the children. "The chief of the big boys, like Peter, is Vasily. And the chief of the grown-ups is the collective farm chairman."

Peter did not like the terminology of that little "big" boss. He was acting like some kind of robber chief: either from old folk tales or from the time of the Civil War. Who knew? But the boy was bold and kind. Peter wanted to make friends. It didn't matter that he was younger, guys like him wouldn't let you down. As Dad always said: you could be stuck on a desert island with him.

"Will you be friends with me?" Peter blurted out without ceremony.

He expected the chief would be flattered with such a generous proposition coming from a Muscovite, and a sixth grader at that.

"With you? That depends on what Vasily says. If he likes you, I'll be your friend. If not, don't come around."

Peter was offended, the answer was so unexpected! The little village boy didn't have an opinion of his own! Depends on what Vasily says! A real kindergarten chief!

"Well, here we are!"

Natasha and Manka were solemnly accompanying an elderly woman, and two other little children ran along behind. "There are so many little kids around," Peter thought.

The woman was dressed in a blue cotton dress with yellow flowers, and a clean, white kerchief tied at the back of her neck. She approached and bowed.

"Are you staying with the Kuznetsovs?" she asked in a sing-song voice.

"Nobody bows in the city," Peter thought. "And her voice is young-sounding, younger than Mama's."

"Yes, we are," his mother answered.

"That's me. Your husband wrote you were coming, but he didn't say when. Please come in..."

She stopped near the porch, took the suitcase from the volunteer porters, and stepped back to let Peter and his mother enter first.

"Please go in."

"Thank you. But first let's get acquainted. What is your name?"

"Anna Kuznetsova," the woman replied. "But you can call me Annushka. Everybody does."

"Fine. And my name is..."

"Maria Antonovna!" Chief Ivan burst into the conversation. "And that's Peter," he said, pointing. "And this is..." he hesitated a second, looking at the dog. "What's his name, guys?" he asked for help.

The children were silent. Peter was also quiet, but for another reason: he was pleased at the chief's defeat. He was gleeful: that'll teach him to interrupt adult's conversations!

"His name is Lord," Maria Antonovna said, smiling.

Ivan held up his index finger and squatting, cried three times: "Lord! Lord! Lord!"

Strange, why did he hold his finger up? To remember better? And why did he squat? How would that help?

The other children sang in a chorus: "Lord! Lord! Lord!"

"That's enough. Go and play," Annushka told them. "They need to rest after their trip."

"Let's go out and play! They need to rest today!" Ivan sang in rhythm. He saluted and did an aboutface.

"Companyyyyyy march!" he ordered.

And the entire crowd moved off behind him.

"Hup, two, three, four! Hup, two, three..." the commander shouted contentedly, proudly marching in front of his "company".

"They're mischievous little ones," Annushka said with a smile. "Don't pay any attention to the little scamps."

"No, they are fine children," Peter's mother said. "And I have fallen in love with Ivan."

"Yes, he's a nice boy," Annushka laughed. "Very bright."

"Mama! You didn't pay them!" Peter remembered, and was about to bolt out the gate, when Annushka touched his shoulder.

"Where are you going? It's just a game to them. They don't take money. How could they?"

"Don't worry, Annushka," Maria Antonovna said, embarrassed. "We'll treat them to some candy." And barely shaking her head, she looked reproachfully at her son.

"That's all right," Annushka agreed. "They'll never refuse candy. They've all got a real sweet tooth."

The room set aside for the visitors was clean and bright, without a trace of dust anywhere. White tulle curtains hung on the windows, and flowers in pots covered with colored paper stood on the windowsill. The table had a pretty linen tablecloth. Two beds stood in one corner of the room, and there were four chairs, an old couch, and a radio on a small shelf above it. Everything was simple and very nice. Peter and his mother exchanged satisfied glances.

And so, Peter's first impressions of the village and its residents were good ones. Only Chief Vasily worried him a little. Would they like one another? Otherwise, he couldn't show his face anywhere. That's what kind of chiefs they had here!

FIRST ACQUAINTANCE

"Annushka! It seems you have a nephew?" Maria Antonovna called.

"Sure do. His name is Dimitry. He's thirteen."

"Could you introduce him to Peter? It's boring for the boy, since he doesn't know anyone."

"You're right!" Annushka said, throwing up her hands. "I should have thought of that. My husband is in the hospital now: he was wounded in the last war. That was years ago,

but he still has problems. I'm in a muddle here all alone. I've got to go to work, and then there are the household affairs. I've got livestock. I'd let myself go hungry before I'd let them. I'll go get Dimitry right away. He lives over there, behind the house."

Annushka put on a kerchief and hurried out the door.

Peter followed her outside. He wandered about aimlessly. Two little girls were jumping rope and a piglet rolled in the dirt about ten meters away. He knew of the existence of piglets thanks to the story, "The Three Little Pigs", which his mother had read to him ages ago. Peter had even drawn pictures of them. He really liked their curly little tails and round pink noses. But Peter had never seen a live one before. Piglets don't run around Moscow, or the summer camp either. And it was even hard to find them outside of Moscow now. Peter had the irresistible urge to touch the animal, to feel the roughness of his little bristles and to scratch him behind the ears. He bent down and began to tickle the piglet under the chin. The animal oinked contentedly, and lifted his leg.

"What is it? Does your belly itch?" Peter laughed, and ran his fingers over the rosy little belly with black spots.

"Oink, oink," the real little pig answered.

Lord, who had tagged after Peter, was bored. He returned to the gate, slipped into the yard, and then raced back, running so fast that he almost knocked Peter down. Peter angrily pushed the dog away, and Lord attacked the piglet with a vengeance. The little pig squealed in fright, leaped up on his short legs, and flew off, squealing so desperately that you would have thought he was being butchered.

The dog froze: he had never seen such a strange creature before. And he raced after the pig with a bark. The black fur on his back stood straight up. Afraid that the unfamiliar dog was coming at them, the little girls threw down their jump rope and darted into the first gate they came to, also squealing at the top of their lungs.

"Back, Lord! Back!" Peter shouted, but it was too late.

A boy appeared on the fence, and his dark eyes stared at Peter angrily.

"Hey, Muscovite! I'll teach you to set your dog on our pigs and to scare little girls!" And the boy shook his fist threateningly.

"What have I gotten myself into?" Peter thought, upset. "No one wanted to scare them."

"You don't have to show your fists," he said, annoyed. "I have some too."

"We'll wait and see, Mr. Stuck-Up!" the boy said, provocatively.

Lord returned with a guilty look, and growled tonelessly at the boy's fist.

"Let's go, Lord," Peter said, and headed for home. "Who was that?" he wondered, opening the gate.

Soon Annushka returned, followed timidly by a boy about medium height with a thin, freckled face. Peter was particularly struck by his large, kind eyes. "Just like Annushka's," he thought. "Not at all like that roughneck's."

"Well, here we are," Annushka said merrily, pushing Dimitry forward. "Introduce yourselves."

"Peter," Peter said proudly, holding out his hand.

"My name is Dimitry," the boy said, blushing with embarrassment. He shook Peter's hand hesitantly.

"There, you're acquainted," Annushka concluded.

Maria Antonovna looked out.

"That's wonderful!" she said. "Go walk around while I make tea."

Both boys nodded and went outside.

"Where should we go?" Dimitry asked.

"I don't care. Wherever you want."

"To the river, maybe?" Dimitry asked questioningly.

"O. K."

They both were silent, feeling uncomfortable. Dimitry timidly glanced at Peter from time to time, and his look was so nice that Peter began to like him.

"Dim, are there a lot of fish in your river?"

"There sure are. All kinds: big bream, and sheat fish, and pike, and even sterlet."

"Why are your boats so strange?" Peter asked.

"What do you mean strange!" Dimitry said in surprise. "Those are real fishing boats. I wouldn't trade them for any motor boat."

"Oh, yeah?" Peter drawled. "Why?"

"You know the noise a motor makes? It scares the fish off in a second. It's only good for going after poachers."

"Di-mi-try!" a girl's high-pitched voice called. "Mama wants you!"

Dimitry looked back unwillingly, and turned to Peter.

"I've got to go home," he explained. "I'll come back this evening to get you. There'll be a lot of kids outside."

"O. K. Good," Peter agreed, pleased.

...Some boys sat on the ground near a small garden in front of a house with two windows looking out onto the street. There really were a lot of them. And Peter immediately noticed the dark-eyed, dark-haired boy of the morning.

"Oh look, the Muscovite has come!" he grinned. "Only be careful where you sit, you don't want to get your pants dirty. Spread out a newspaper."

"What are you hassling me for?" Peter countered. "I don't see you sitting on a newspaper."

"Some comparison!" the dark-haired boy laughed. "I'm used to simple things. Here we're one for all and all for one, you got that?"

"Well, so?"

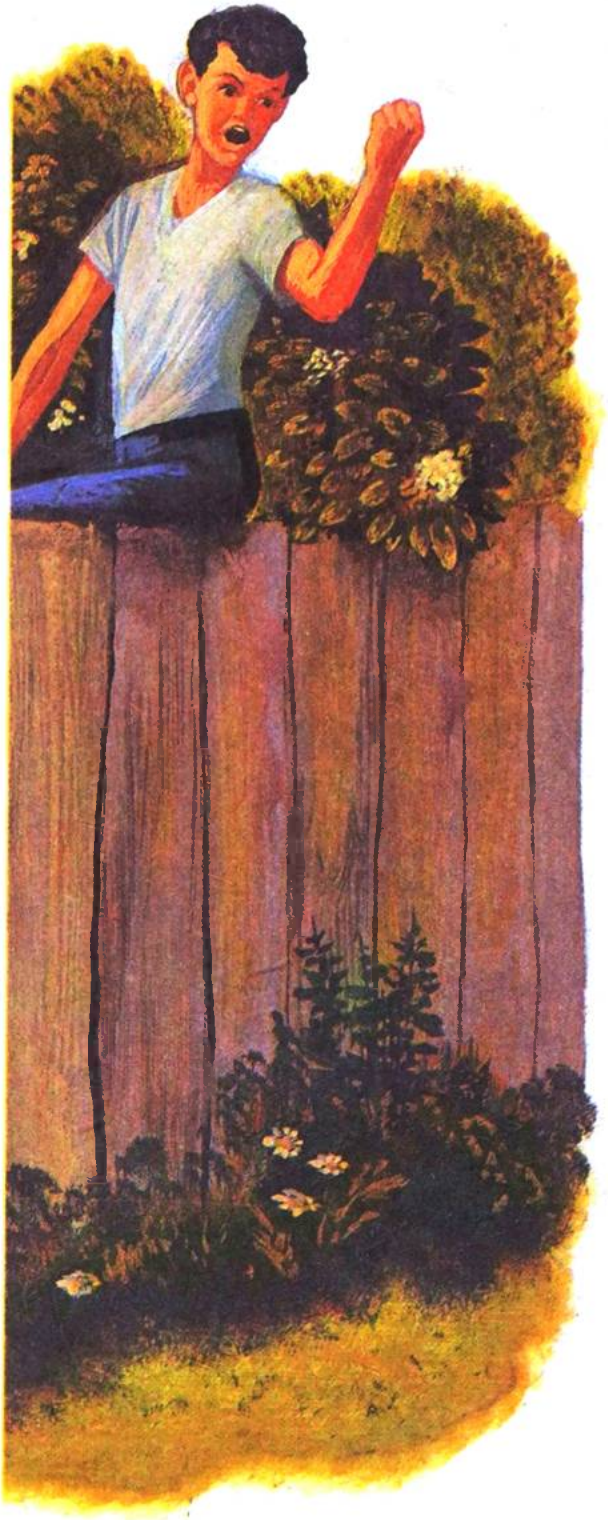
"As soon as you got here you started sticking your nose in the air," the dark-haired boy said, incensed. "Muscovite! Sets his dog on little girls and pigs."

"Why are you lying like that?" Peter said, angry.

"Be careful, Mama's boy, don't hurt your little feet," and the dark-haired boy grabbed one foot and then the other. "Ouch, Mama, it hurts! I can't go barefoot!"

The others laughed.

"What can I do?" Peter thought frantically. "I could punch him, but he's not alone. They'd beat me to a pulp." He felt hurt and frustrated.



"He who laughs last, laughs best," he shouted angrily, and turned and went home.

Peter sat down on a bench near the gate. His heart beat excitedly. Slowly his anger abated, and he felt depressed. He was alone in that beautiful village.

The moon was reflected in a phosphorous light on the river. Mysterious shadows from the trees lay on the ground. A light breeze barely moved the leaves, and the rustle they made was melodic and tender, like soft music.

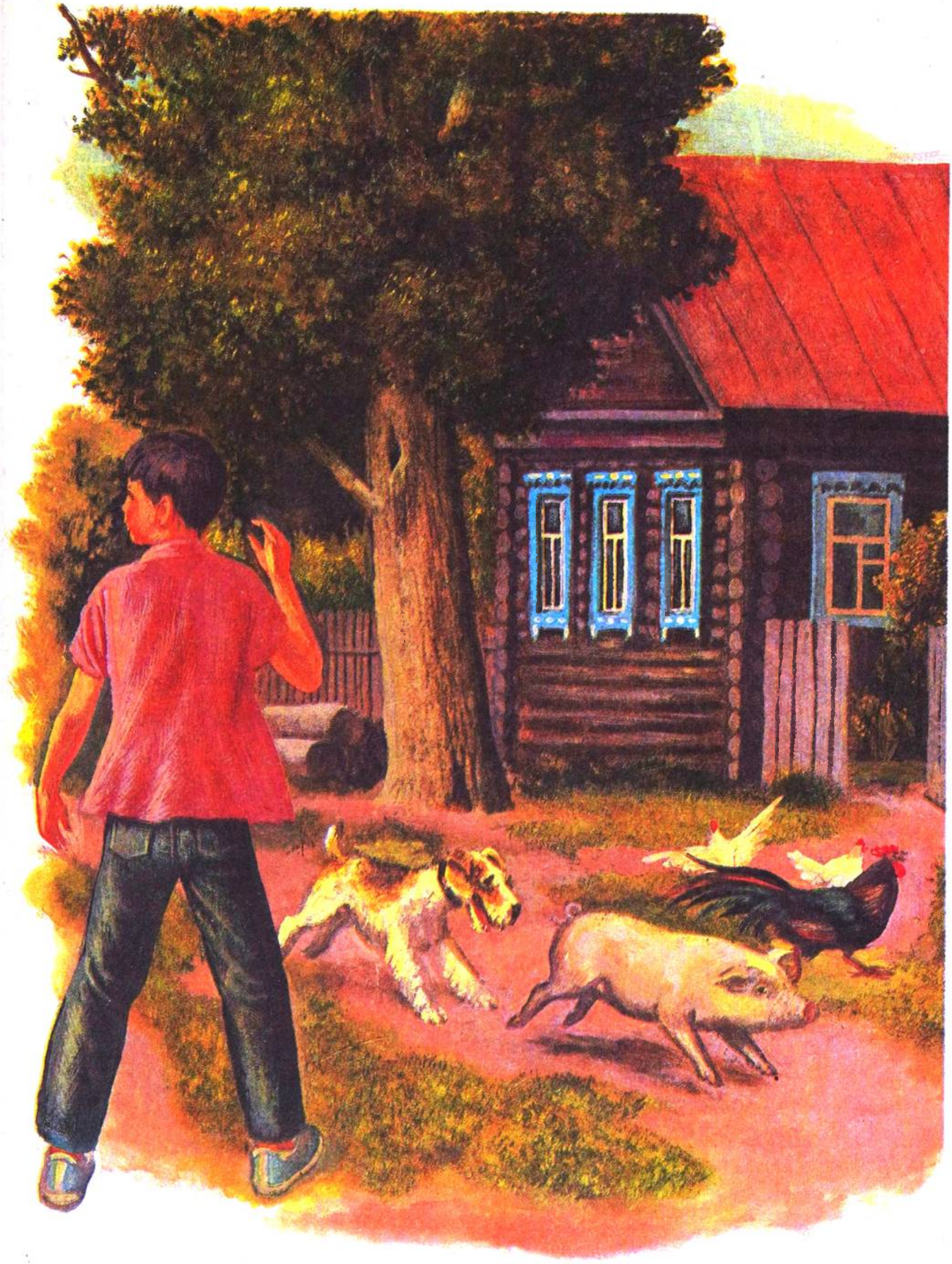
The gate squeaked, and Lord came running out. Peter's mother followed.

"Lord! Come here, boy!" Peter called.

Lord leaped into his arms excitedly, whimpering with joy.

"Hey, good dog. You're bored too, aren't you? Well, don't worry. From now on we'll go everywhere together. We don't need anybody! Just the two of us! Right?"

Lord rubbed against Peter, licked his hand and after turning



around twice, began to roll in the dirt.

"Lord, stop that! Have you gone crazy? You'll be filthy. Ma-a-a!" he shouted. "Let's walk down to the river so he can take a swim."

"It's too late," his mother said calmly, not expressing a readiness to go. But when she saw that Peter began to sulk, she hesitated. "He came back from his walk awfully fast, and seems upset about something. I ought to help him," she thought.

"But, why don't we go anyway," she said aloud, more gently.

They walked down to the river. Peter picked up a stick that was lying on the ground, and threw it in the water from the high bank.

"Go get it, Lord!" he shouted.

The dog shot forward so fast that stones and clumps of earth flew. The stick hit the water with a splash, and dark rings radiated from the spot. Lord swam, his paws working furiously, grabbed the stick, and turned to swim back.

"That's a boy! Good dog!" Peter praised him, as he took the stick from the dog. He threw it in the water a second time. "Do it again, Lord!"

The wind blew, and the stick was caught in the current.

"Come on, come on!" Peter shouted, slapping his knees.

He even forgot about his troubles, and laughed wholeheartedly when Lord gulped a mouthful of water instead of the stick, snorted, and again tried to catch the stick which was bobbing on the waves.

UNEXPECTED UNPLEASANTNESS

The morning sky was clear, the sun shone merrily, birds chirped in the gardens, chickens cackled in the yards, geese honked, and the mooing of a cow could be heard in the distance. After bolting down his breakfast, Peter took a pail and called to Lord. The two of them went outside. They were headed for the clearing where, according to Dimitry, wild strawberries grew in abundance. Peter hummed a song to himself. Lord

was in a good mood too, and ran ahead, sometimes stopping to sniff a stump. Then he would snort, and come back to Peter for some reason, only to run ahead again.

A dense forest lined both sides of the clearing, and the strawberries were larger and more numerous closer to the trees. In searching for the best berries, Peter entered the forest. The sun rose higher and higher. He wiped the drops of perspiration from his forehead, and called Lord.

"Boy, is it hot! You think so too, huh, Lord? Why don't we go for a swim?"

The dog looked at Peter sweetly, and it seemed as if he was about to shout: yes, yes, only let's hurry. It's so hot.

He had run himself ragged, racing all around the clearing, and now panted heavily, his tongue hanging so far out of his mouth it almost touched the ground.

"But we ought to wait a little," Peter said, after a moment's thought. "We should pick a few more," he said and pointed to the pail. "Then we'll go."

He put the pail on a stump and began to pick flowers. A strange sound caused him to turn around. No one was anywhere to be seen.

"What was that, Lord?"

The dog raced to one side, began to sniff the ground, and then barked loudly, looking toward the forest. Peter decided to go home right away, and went to get the pail. He stopped suddenly: it lay on the ground and most of the strawberries were strewn in the grass. A stone was nearby. Peter bit his lip, upset. "I wonder who can throw that well?" he thought. He called Lord and began to run around the clearing, but did not find anyone. He hung his head, gathered up the strawberries half-heartedly, and trudged home dejectedly. His good mood was spoiled. "Someone is following me," he thought. "O. K. You just wait. If I catch you, you'll be sorry."

"Why are you so gloomy?" his mother asked when he got home.

"I fell," Peter lied, after a moment's hesitation. "The straw-

berries spilled, and I ruined Dad's pail. See, the enamel is chipped."

He blushed and turned away. "If she notices, she'll ask me all kinds of questions," Peter thought. "And then she won't let me go anywhere."

"How in the world did you manage to do that?" his mother said. "You never watch where you're going."

She poured the strawberries into a bowl.

"Oh, how wonderful!" she said, smelling the fresh, ripe berries. "Now you should rest, and then you can enjoy yourself some more. You've got the whole day ahead of you."

"Rest, enjoy myself..." Peter repeated to himself. How he wanted to tell his mother everything! But then she wouldn't let him wander around. She'd be afraid. No, it was better not to say anything, so Peter suppressed the desire. "If only Dad would get here soon."

It was boring at home alone. After yesterday's incident he didn't want to go walking around the village, so he decided to ask Annushka to show him the boat after lunch.

After hearing his request, Annushka went and got the key to the padlock.

"We can go now, if you want. I have some time. Because you won't find it yourself. There are a lot of boats on the bank and you'd have a hard time figuring out which is ours."

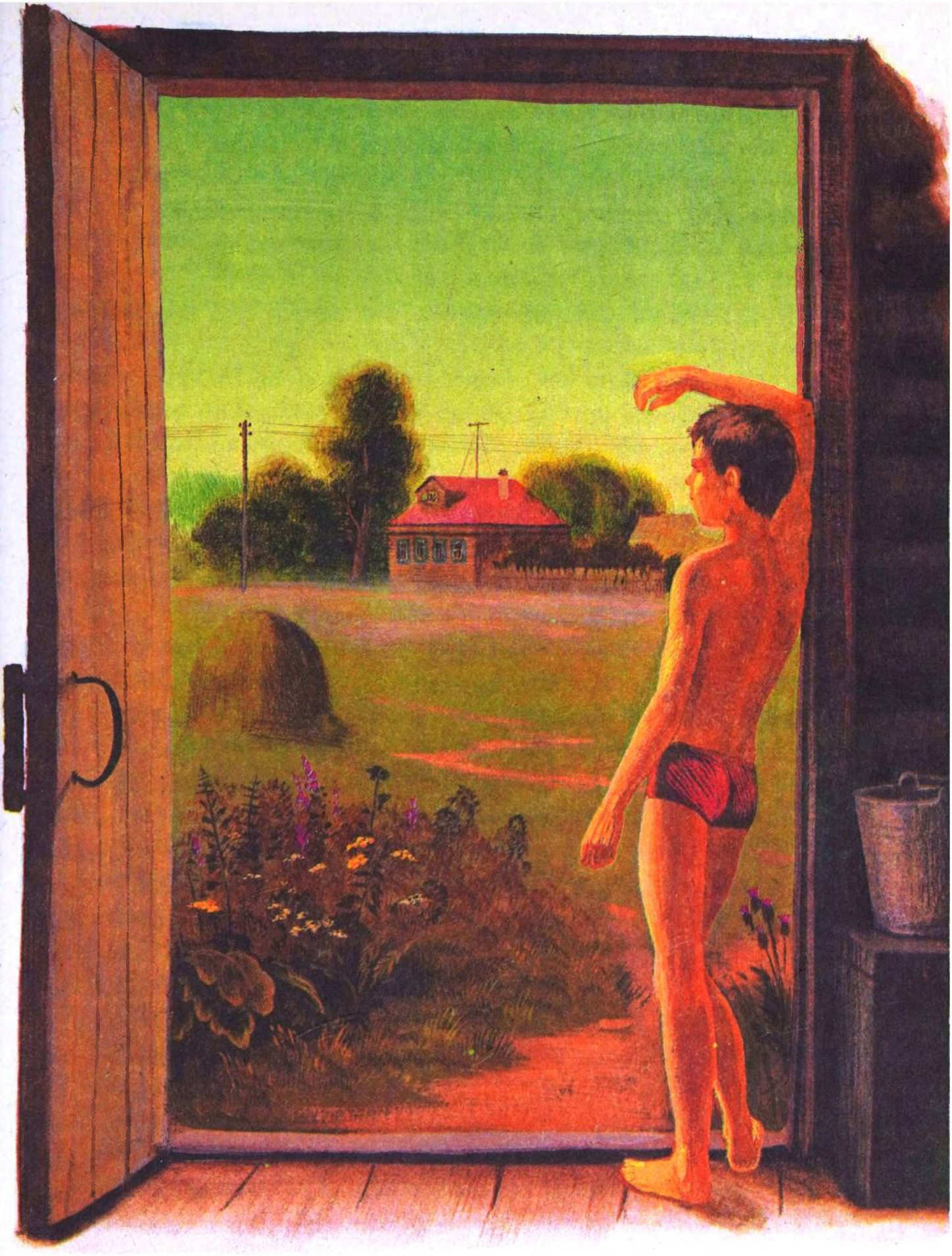
"Let's go," Peter agreed happily. And he ran to the gate.

"Wait, where are you going?" Annushka laughed. "We haven't gotten the oar. How are you going to take out the boat without an oar?" She went to the shed.

Peter's eyebrows went up in surprise when Annushka handed it to him. "What a strange oar! A stick with a cross-piece at the top and some kind of oval shaped disk at the bottom."

When his mother saw him with the oar, she hurried over, talking as she came: "Just be careful, Peter, please. Maybe it would be better if I came with you?"

"I can swim," Peter said, displeased. "That's all I need is for you to come with me."



"Mama's boy... mama's boy..." The spiteful words of the dark-haired boy echoed in his ears.

"You may know how to swim, but accidents can happen," his mother continued, not relenting.

"Oh, Mom!"

"All right," his mother said, after a pause. "But be careful. Stay close to the bank. And I'll watch how you're doing from the hill."

"O. K." Peter shouted, waving his hand. He was already off.

He and Annushka went down to the river. Several black, pitch-covered boats lay bottom-up on the bank. The one in the middle was fastened with a heavy metal chain to the highest stake. Annushka walked over to it.

"This is ours," she said, and helped Peter turn the boat over and launch it.

"Don't forget the seat," she said, handing him a smooth plank she had taken off the chain.

Peter thanked her, and leaped in. The boat began to rock and he almost toppled into the water. "This isn't a boat, but a tippy trough!" he thought. "I need to be more careful, or I'll end up going for a swim clothes and all."

At first, things didn't go too well. When Peter wanted to turn to the right, the boat moved to the left, and vice versa. But gradually he got the hang of it, and the boat began to respond. Finally it straightened out and gently glided along the river. "This is great!" Peter thought in delight. He was so busy learning how to use that funny-looking oar, he did not notice the sun was setting. It was time to go home. He began to row back. He dragged the boat up on the bank and fastened the chain to the seat. Whistling a merry tune, he turned the boat over and locked it to the stake. He did everything as instructed.

He returned home tired, but in a good mood.

"Well, that's much better," his mother said in satisfaction, as she served him supper. "It's a pleasure to look at you now. A big difference from this morning."

The next morning, right after breakfast, Peter ran down to the river to take the boat out again.

Someone's seat lay on the ground near the boat, split in two. Or maybe it was just a plank, Peter did not know for sure. He kicked it to one side, unlocked the padlock and turned the boat over. Strange, the seat was missing. "Don't tell me I forgot to lock it yesterday," Peter thought in surprise. "But no, I remember I put it on the chain. Maybe I crushed it when I turned the boat over?" He shrugged his shoulders, put the two halves together, and lay them in the stern of the boat. Then he pushed the boat into the water and moved away from the shore.

Once out on the spacious river, he almost forgot that slight unpleasantness, and his mood improved. Rowing out even further, he saw a sandy bank and went ashore there. He got out of the boat and lay down on the white beach. Then he went swimming and again sunned himself on the hot sand. About five minutes later he sat down next to the boat and began to watch schools of minnows darting in the water along the bank.

It was time for lunch, so Peter crawled back into the boat. No matter how he tried, he couldn't find a comfortable way to sit. He had already rubbed his rear end raw on the broken seat, which kept separating in the middle. It hurt to sit. He ended up taking off his shirt and using it as a cushion. That was a little better. If it weren't for the problem with the seat, you could say he had had a wonderful time. "I'll make a new one," he decided. "I'll ask Annushka for a plank and plane it, using the old one as a model."

And that was what he did. The new seat turned out even better than the old one, and Peter was pleased with himself.

At lunch he kept fidgeting.

"What is wrong with you?" his mother asked. "Why are you so restless?"

"It's nothing... I got a blister from the boat seat," he answered unwillingly.

"Poor you," his mother smiled. "You paddled around for so long you wore out your own seat."

After lunch he decided he wouldn't go out in the boat anymore that day, and remained home. But it was boring to sit around with nothing to do, so he went outside to see what Annushka was doing. It was her day off, and she had been busy in the garden all morning. Now she was cleaning out the cow shed.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"What does it look like?" Annushka said with a smile. "I have to clean up after the cow. And take the eggs out of the trough. If you'd like, why don't you climb up and collect them."

"Boy, would I!" Peter said, and picking up the basket that was on the ground, he climbed up the ladder leaning against the wall and into the hayloft. There, in the trough were five small eggs and three large ones. He had never seen such big eggs before.

"Wow, Annushka has some chickens!" he said, delighted. "I wonder what kind they are? Probably some record-breaking ones."

"How are you doing, Peter?" Annushka called from below. "How many did you gather?"

"Eight," he said proudly.

"How many?" she repeated in surprise. "You said eight? That's too many. Maybe someone else's chickens laid some there."

Peter climbed down, and when Annushka looked in the basket she burst out laughing. "Those big ones are decoys. Why did you take them?"

"Decoys?" Peter said. Now it was his turn to be surprised.

"They're goose eggs. We also call them addle eggs. They're put there so the hens know where to lay."

"So those are goose eggs!" Peter laughed too. "I thought you must have special chickens to lay huge eggs like those. What does addle egg mean?"

"It's an unfertile egg. Chicks won't hatch from them. You

even have to be careful when you throw them away. The farther from the house, the better. The best thing to do is to bury them. Heaven forbid they break. They'll drive you out of the house. They smell so horrible you can't stand it."

"Annushka, would you give me one of them?" Peter asked.

"Sure, only what do you want it for?"

"I'll poke a hole in it and pour out all the crud. Then I'll dry it out, fill it with sand, stick clay in the hole and take it to Moscow. I bet over half the kids in my class have never seen a goose egg."

"In that case, you can certainly have one. But get rid of the insides far from the house, all right?"

"O. K." Peter nodded, and picked the largest egg in the basket.

THE SURVEILLANCE CONTINUES

The next morning he dug up some worms, took a piece of clay, a penknife, several thick pieces of straw, the egg, a fishing rod, and the new seat, and ran down to the bank. He planned to clean the egg, do some fishing, and explore the other side of the river. When Peter approached the boat, he immediately saw a note pasted to the side, which read: "We will test you. We don't like stuck-ups. One for all and all for one."

Peter felt uneasy. "Go ahead and test," he mentally shouted at his enemy. "He should have written 'all ganging up on one.' It would have been closer to the truth."

"What can they do to me?" he thought. "Now I know that the pail of strawberries and the broken seat are their doing. It's that black-haired kid! He wrote the note, I'm sure. The other evening he also said they are one for all and all for one. Maybe I should go home. No, I won't," he said to himself decisively. "Then they'll laugh at me and call me a coward. And I'll never be able to show my face until Dad gets here. They'll tease me and call me a mama's boy from Moscow."

He frowned, read the note once more, and resolutely pushed the boat into the water.

He had learned to row, and the boat slid gracefully through the water. "There's your tippy trough," he thought, laughing at himself as he remembered his first day with the boat. "Dad will probably like it. It's a lot like an Indian canoe."

The opposite bank, which began as a gentle slope, gradually climbed to a low cliff, speckled with round holes. "That's probably where the marlets' nests are that Dimitry talked about. I should look them over carefully. I wonder why Dimitry hasn't come to see me again? Maybe their chief ordered him not to. What if that dark-haired boy is their chief. He certainly could be. When Dad comes I'll tell him everything! I bet he'll remember how it was when he was a kid and others picked on him for nothing. You wait, Black Hair. I'll get even with you."

When Peter looked around he noticed another boat with three boys not far from his. He did not know who they were, and they were too far away to see clearly. "Probably going fishing," he thought, and began to move toward the bank.

The sun beat down mercilessly, and Peter decided he'd better put his shirt on after his swim, or he might burn.

He took a running start and dove in the water. He immediately felt refreshed and happy, and began to swim, shouting merrily. He swam well. It was a good thing his father had taken him to the pool since he was six. For some reason, he felt like swimming out farther today, and goofing around. He slapped the water with his palms, stretched out his arms, then his legs, and turned over on his back and lay still, squinting slightly at the blue sky.

When he tired of playing around, he swam ashore, and noticed two boys pushing his boat into the water.

"Hey! What are you taking mine for?" he shouted.

At that point the boys leaped in the boat and paddled.

"What can I do now?" Peter thought anxiously. "I can't catch them. Maybe they'll row around for a while and then come back? Who knows?"

And suddenly Peter remembered the note with the words: "We don't like stuck-ups... We'll test you..."

"Some test," he said angrily. "Steal my boat and leave me on the opposite bank hungry with no clothes! And Dad wrote that the kids here were nice. Real nice! But all the same, I won't give in to them. I'll walk along the bank. Maybe someone else is here and I can go back with them." Clinging to that thought, Peter began to walk along the river, but as luck would have it, there was no one to be seen.

And his boat followed him as if teasing, moving farther out into the river or coming in close to shore.

Peter sat down in the sand and put his arms around his knees. What could he do? It was almost lunchtime. He had to get home soon or his mother would get upset and think he drowned. She'd start to cry, and they'd begin searching for him. And here he sat, because of some crummy boys! And there's not a thing he could do.

The boat continued to move along the bank, and that really bothered Peter. "So they want me to give up, do they? They'll have a long wait. What if I swim across? The river isn't very wide here. But no, I'm not strong enough and I could drown." He remembered his father's letter: "...the river is unfamiliar... Don't be a coward, but don't take unnecessary chances."

"Swim across, swim across..." pounded in his brain. "No, wait," the voice of reason said. "You've never swam that far before." Peter leaped to his feet and began to pace rapidly along the edge of the water to calm himself. Suddenly he heard a mocking voice:

"Hey, Muscovite, you scared? How do you like it?"

They shouted something else, he couldn't hear.

"So that's it. They're looking for a good laugh. Think I'm a coward. Well, I'll show them what kind of people Muscovites can be!" and he took a running start and dove in the river.

At first he swam quickly, but that wore him out too fast. He looked back: "I haven't even gone halfway and I'm already tired. I should swim slower."

Near the middle of the river the water got much colder. "What if I get a cramp?" he thought, and it seemed his

leg was actually beginning to cramp from the cold. "You won't make it," a voice inside him said. "You won't make it, you fool." Suddenly the cold current ended and it was easier to swim.

He had gone over halfway, and the boat with the boys continued to follow him. "Let them jump for joy," Peter thought indifferently. He was exhausted and felt nauseous. His arms felt like lead, and he would have given anything to rest. He turned over on his back, and the hot sun beat down on his face. White clouds floated slowly by, and a lark sang somewhere. "Can it be that I'll never see all this again," he thought dully. "I'll probably drown soon, and will end up lying on the bottom of a strange river. The crayfish will eat me. Poor Mama and Dad! Boy, will they cry. And so will Nikolai. And all because of that black-haired kid." He was just about to give up when the voice persisted: "Don't lose heart. Remember the soldiers at the front. They didn't give up when forced to cross huge rivers. But you! You're as weak as they come..." And Peter pushed on, gritting his teeth. After going a few more meters he felt he was losing consciousness.

"Hey, Muscovite! Over here! Swim over to the boat. You'll drown! Hey, do you hear me? You're crazy!"

Peter opened his eyes. That very black-haired boy was in the water not far from him: he was holding on to the boat with one hand and paddling with the other, trying to get closer to Peter. The second boy was still in the boat, handling the oar. The black-haired boy looked upset.

"Come here!" he said pleadingly.

Peter came to himself a little, turned over on his side, and again looked into the hated face of the black-haired boy. He was about eight or ten meters from the bank. "Just a bit more," he whispered, not hearing his own voice. And gathering his last ounce of strength, he pushed on. Less than five meters to go, but were they difficult! It would be easier to swim forty meters than that last meter or meter and a half. "I can probably touch bottom now," he forced himself to think. But he was

afraid to put his feet down. The boat shot past him and rode up on the bank. Another two or three strokes — and Peter grasped the boat and stood up.

He unsteadily climbed up the bank. His head was spinning but it was easier to breathe, though his body felt like lead. He wanted to collapse on the ground and never get up. His eyes closed on their own, and he walked along almost by feel. There it was! The ground! Right under his feet!

Sharp stones dug into his soles. Peter forced himself to open his eyes. The black-haired boy stood in front of him, his head down. And there were another five kids there, too. It was quiet. No one said a word. But Peter didn't notice the black-haired boy's guilty look, or the admiring eyes of the others who had apparently watched the water marathon. Peter was furious. How could he pay that black-haired kid back? Get revenge for laughing at him? Suddenly Peter smiled weakly, as an unexpected thought came to him. He returned to the boat, got the addle egg out from under the seat, and threw it straight at the black-haired boy.

The egg hit with a loud crack, and awful-looking greenish-yellow stuff dribbled down the boy's white shirt. An offensive smell wafted through the air. Peter climbed up the hill, wobbling slightly. "Now they'll beat me to a pulp," he thought without fear. "Well, let them. I don't care."

"Look at Vasily! What a beauty!" someone yelled, laughing.

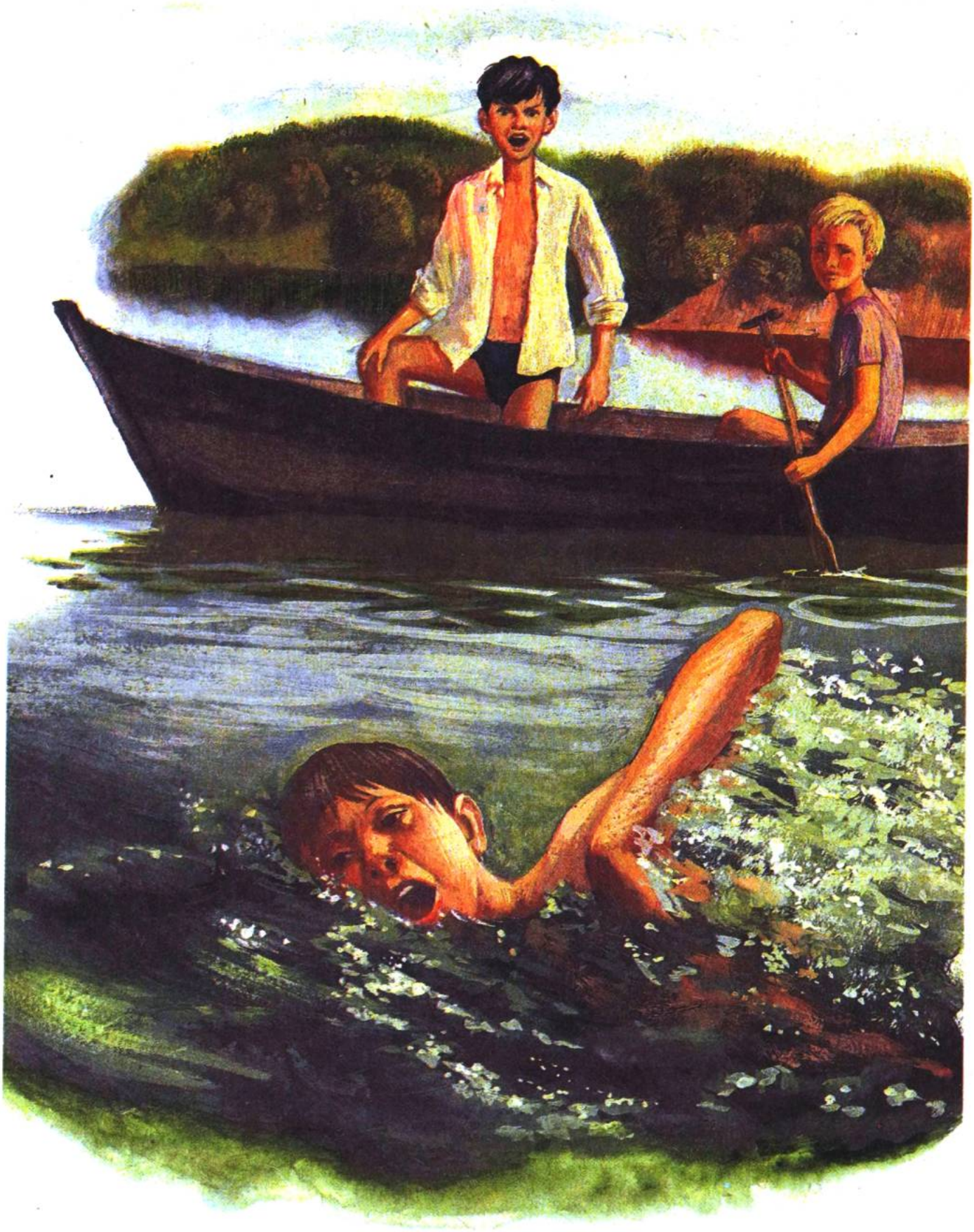
"Ugh, guys! That smell! Let's get out of here or we'll suffocate!"

"Gas mask! Somebody give me a gas mask!" the boy standing next to Vasily shouted, and covered his mouth and nose with his hands.

"I can't stand it. I'm dying with laughter," the first boy continued.

"Ah-ha, their chief is named Vasily. So Ivan was probably talking about that black-haired kid," Peter thought, looking back. Vasily stood in the same spot. Two boys were laughing, now holding their stomachs now their heads. The rest were silent.

The scene shocked Peter. "Instead of running after me,



they are laughing at their chief. He's in worse shape than I am now, and they're laughing at him. How can that happen? Where is their 'one for all and all for one'." He suddenly remembered Nikolai and his insulting mockery, and submitting to the impulse of his feelings, suddenly raised his fist and shouted:

"Why are you laughing? What if that were you? Some friends!"

The laughter died. The boys' faces fell and they looked at Peter in bewilderment, but he turned and continued up the hill. "They'll think I'm making up to him. That I got scared. Well, let them." He collapsed on the ground under the first willow he came to — he had no strength to go on.

The boys dispersed, but Vasily still stood on the bank, looking in the direction Peter had taken.

"He probably wants to see where I went. Wants to catch up with me and get even," Peter thought. He sighed, slowly stood up, and continued his climb.

It was difficult to walk — his legs refused to obey. He was starving. He glanced back: Vasily was zealously washing his hands and face. Then he began to rinse his shirt. After squeezing the water out, he held it up in the air, stretching it. The wind caught the shirt and it began to flutter. It whipped about like a flag in windy weather.

Peter walked into the house. His mother looked up from her writing.

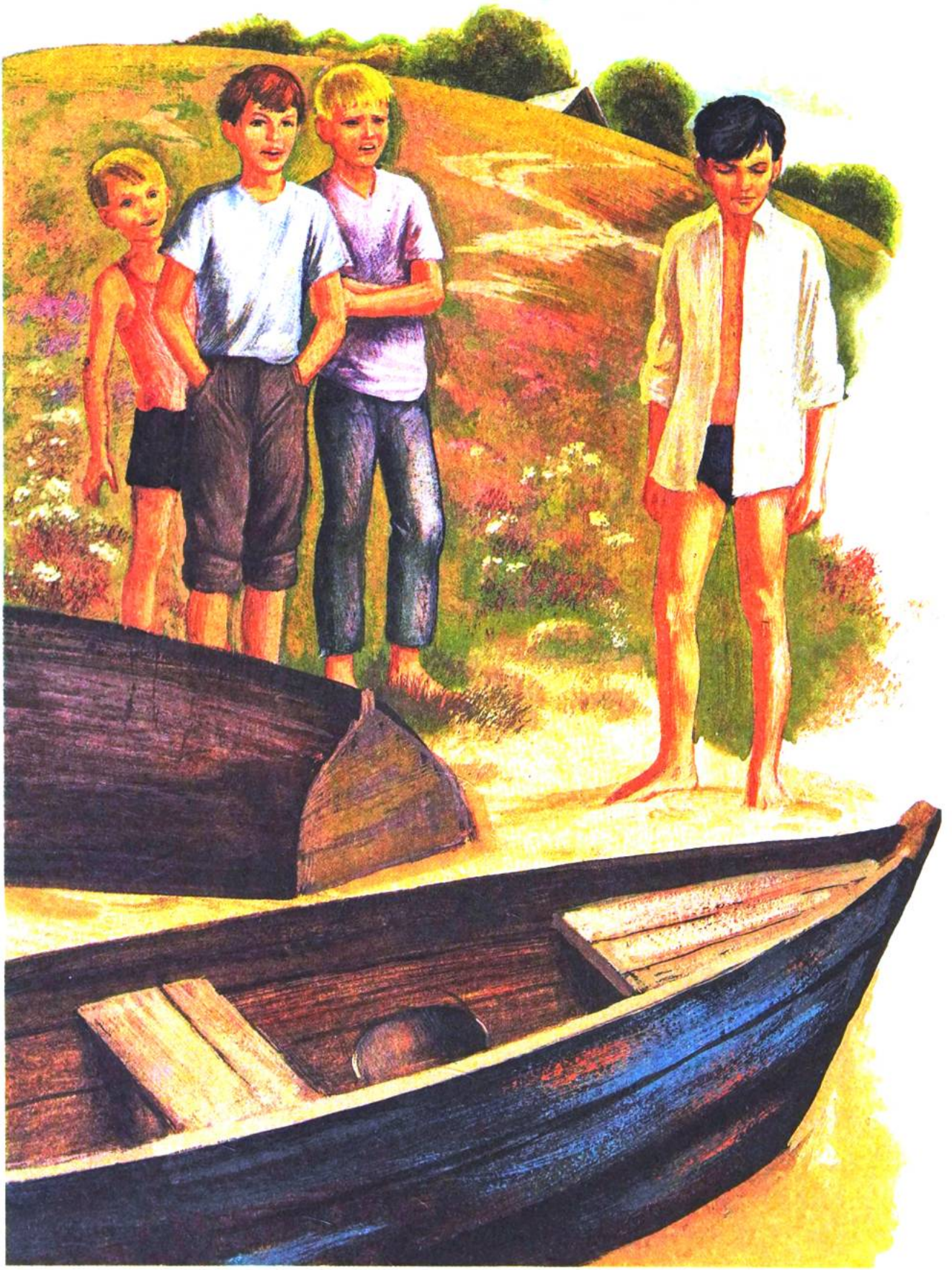
"What happened?" she asked in fright after seeing her son. "You're so pale! And where are your things?"

"A good question, where are they?" Peter thought as he stood in his wet bathing suit in the middle of the room. Everything else was in the boat. "Will Vasily take them? And the boat isn't fastened to the stake either."

"Why don't you say something?"

"Give me something to eat," he muttered in response.

He looked so tired and upset, that his mother only shook her head and went to get things ready for lunch. "Something happened," she thought. "But I'll leave him alone for now.



Let him eat, take a rest and calm down. Then we can talk about it."

Peter was famished and attacked his food. He gulped down his soup in a matter of seconds, and pushed the empty bowl toward the pot:

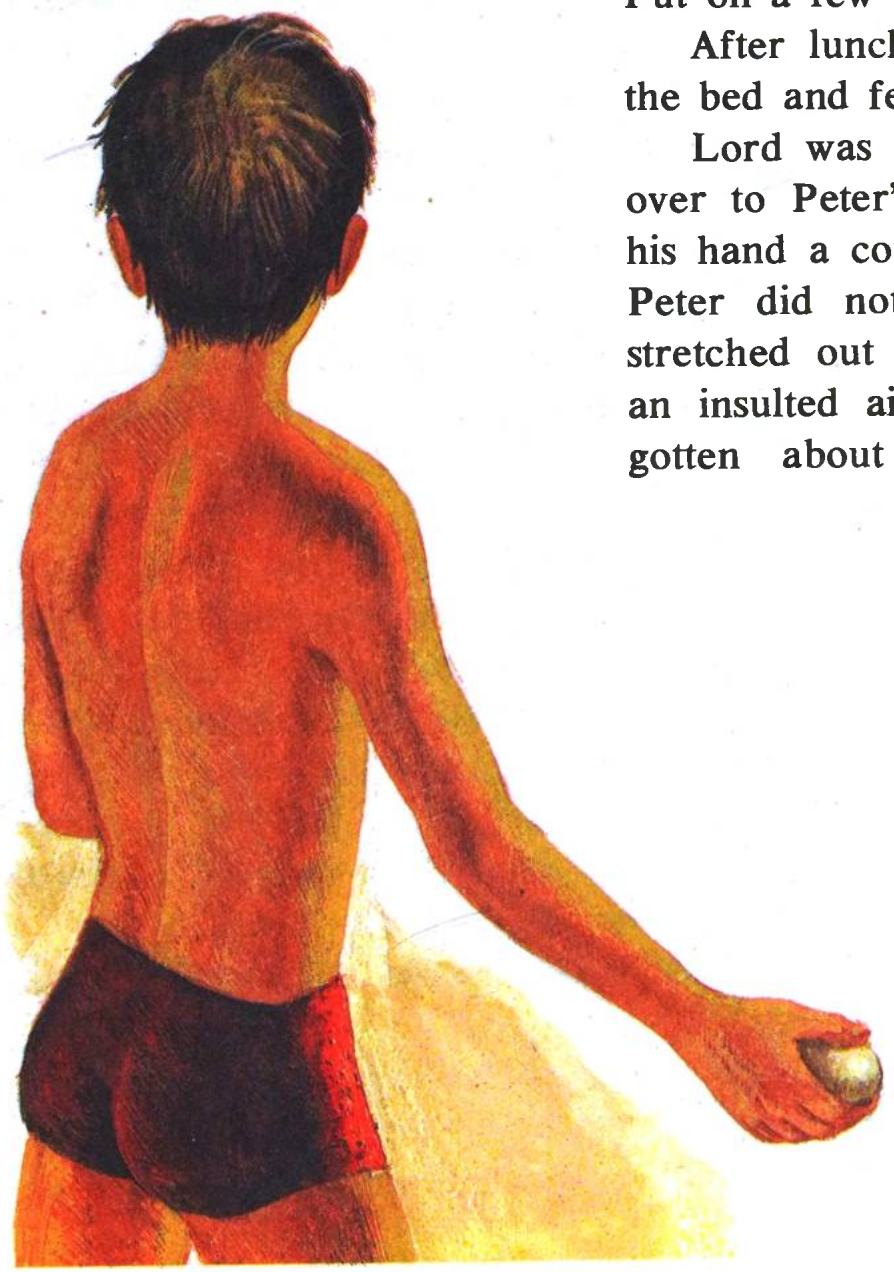
"Could I have some more, Mom?"

His mother smiled, and poured him a second helping.

"The country air agrees with you. Eat as much as you want. Put on a few pounds."

After lunch he collapsed on the bed and fell asleep instantly.

Lord was bored. He walked over to Peter's bed, and licked his hand a couple of times. But Peter did not even stir. Lord stretched out on the floor with an insulted air. Peter had forgotten about him completely.



DAY OF RECKONING

It was evening when Peter awoke. Sleep had refreshed him and he again felt strong. But oh, how his body ached! He groaned as he got up. The room was quiet and empty: no Lord and no Mama. He went out into the yard. Mama, Annushka and Dimitry sat on a bench under a branchy linden tree. Lord lay at their feet. When he saw Peter, he leaped to his feet and bounded over to him.

"What's the matter, fellow? You miss me?" Peter gently patted the dog.

"Here's the sleepy head! You awake now? It will be time for bed soon and you've just gotten up," his mother said gently, looking at her son.

Peter laughed affectedly, yawned and rubbed his eyes:

"So what! Whoever wants to, can go to bed. I've had plenty of sleep."

And he looked suspiciously at Dimitry. "What's he here for?" He immediately recalled the events of the day.

"Why don't you come over here?" his mother asked in surprise. "Dimitry has been waiting for you for hours. Go take a walk, and Annushka and I will do some work in the house." She and Annushka got up and went inside.

Whether he liked it or not, he had to go over to Dimitry.

"Hello," he growled discontentedly, holding out his hand.

"Hello," Dimitry said timidly, and also held out his.

He looked upset about something. He kept his head down, as if he were ashamed to look Peter in the eye.

"Real wishy-washy," Peter thought.

"Why didn't you come for so long?" he asked to break the silence.

"I'm here now," Dimitry said vaguely. Then he looked around, leaned over, and whispered abruptly in Peter's ear:

"Vasily asked me to come get you. He's over there, at the bottom of the hill. He's waiting."

That was the last thing Peter expected. "Why would he want to see me?" he thought anxiously.

"Why don't you answer? Are you coming or not?" Dimitry asked. "Vasily really wants to see you." He raised his eyes and looked straight at Peter. "He says he's got business with the Muscovite," he added.

"What kind of business could I have with Vasily?" Peter thought. "I bet it's a trap. First they'll lure me there, and then ambush me. He's probably thought up some new trick. You'd think he'd be tired of that by now..."

"Well, are you coming?" Dimitry asked again. "Vasily will be worn out with waiting."

"What?" Peter said, shaking off the unpleasant thoughts.

He did not want to go. But if he didn't, they'd think he got scared. He had no choice.

"I'm coming," he said aloud, knitting his brows. "I'll be right there. First I have to tell my mother I'm going."

"And I'll run and tell Vasily you're coming!" Dimitry said, happily. "That's great!" he even laughed. "Vasily didn't think you'd come, but I told him you would. I was right."

His timidity disappeared, and his face brightened. He raced off toward the river.

Peter watched him go, and then spit on the ground contemptuously.

"You're all from the same mold. Well, never mind, we'll see who's stronger," he thought.

"Lord! Lord! Come with me." He bent down to the dog, took his intelligent head in his hands, and looked tenderly into his eyes. "You are my only defender. We won't give in without a fight. Right, Lord?" He patted the dog's head. "Mom, I'm going for a walk and I'm taking Lord," he shouted.

"All right, but don't be gone too long," his mother said, looking out the window. "You can catch cold being on the river at night."

Peter jogged to the gate. "I don't know about catching a cold, but I won't have less than five bruises, that's for sure," he thought. "The main thing is not to get scared."

Lord bounded ahead.

"They could hurt the dog. I probably should keep him next to me." Peter thought. "Back, Lord! Heel!" he commanded.

The dog returned drudgingly. From the top of the hill Peter could see Vasily sitting on an overturned boat which was lying in the spot Annushka's usually was. Dimitry was running toward him as fast as he could. The chief stood up, and Dimitry said something to him, waving his arms. Then Dimitry turned and pointed to Peter.

"I wonder what they're planning," he thought. "Heel, Lord!" he shouted.

The dog stopped and walked alongside his owner. Vasily and Dimitry began to walk toward Peter.

"Just like diplomatic talks," Peter snickered.

Both sides neared one another and stopped. There was an uneasy silence. Vasily looked at the ground and it was impossible to see the expression on his face.

"Hello," he finally said tonelessly.

"Hello," Peter answered, just as curtly.

"Well, Dimitry, you can go now. Thanks."

"O. K. See you later," his friend said, and ran skipping up the hill.

"What's he showing off for? As if he wants to get even one to one, without witnesses," Peter thought sarcastically. "But he could have hidden his little friends under those boats. They'll jump out on signal. The only trouble is, his friends aren't very reliable. I'll set Lord on them, and they'll turn tail and run."

Vasily was silent. Peter was too. Then he began to get bored. "What's the joke?" he thought, exasperated. "He ought to belt me one to get things started!" He didn't want to start things himself. "I didn't ask to see him, he wanted to see me. It won't be according to the rules if I begin." But Peter did not want to fight. Not at all. Everything was so nice: the sun was setting, the sky was changing colors from light blue to bright orange, fishermen floated on the river in boats, and the bank was co-
 vered with green reed and sedge. Water-lilies and bright yellow

water-beans lay motionless on the water, delighting in the evening coolness. Sometimes the water rippled, and then the rays of the setting sun were reflected. "Look at all the different colors!" Peter thought in delight. "You can't count them all." And he stood there admiring the approaching evening.

Lord grew tired of their diplomacy, and began to shift from one foot to the other, or rather, from one paw to the other. His nostrils flared and his eyes shone. Suddenly a snipe appeared over the water. Lord whined eagerly, and leaped into the water.

"Too bad Dad isn't here," Peter whispered. "He'd get him with one shot."

"You can't hunt now anyway," Vasily spoke unexpectedly. "It's out of season. You'd be poaching." And then he began to talk rapidly, as if afraid Peter would leave. "My father has a double-barrel shotgun, and goes hunting too. He takes me with him, but he won't let me have a gun. Says I'm too young."

"Your father isn't the only one who likes to hunt — mine does too," Peter said, still angry. "But he hasn't come yet. All he does is work."

"If he does not get here, why don't you come with us?" Vasily asked with feeling.

"As if you'd take me," Peter said ironically.

"Of course we'd take you! I'll ask my Dad. But he isn't a hunter like everybody else. They go just to kill birds, and they don't care what kind. The main thing for them is to get as many as they can. But my father gets mad at them. He loves nature. He hardly ever kills birds, and then only those in season. He's teaching me to be like that. The kids here have started to protect the environment. We organize patrols!" he said proudly.

"Yea-a-a, it's great here, that's for sure," Peter agreed, and took a deep breath. The river, reeds and mud in the backwater smelled wonderful. The odor from the pitch-covered boats was particularly nice.

"I love this place. When I grow up I'm staying right here," Vasily said with conviction.

Peter looked at Vasily and didn't recognize him: his gaze was dreamy and very pleasant, and his eyes were soft and gentle. He did not have anything in common with that roughneck who had been angry with him for the piglet.

"I was really mad at you then," Vasily continued. "I thought you acted fresh when you got here. Acting like you were different somehow because you're from Moscow. You think we're worse? We're just like other kids. We're all friends here. Of course, there are some bad kids, but that's the same everywhere. And I thought you were a show-off. I wanted to teach you a lesson. But now..." he fell silent, and looked guiltily at Peter. "Your things are in one piece," he continued quietly. "They're under the boat. You can get them, only the addle egg is missing," and he laughed.

Peter felt uncomfortable.

"You know..." he began in embarrassment.

"I know! That was a great idea! I barely managed to wash it all out. And you're sure no coward. You didn't even complain to your mother."

"How do you know?" Peter asked in surprise.

"I just know. I know everything. Last year a city boy came and we couldn't wait until he left. He was so awful — a real tattle-tale. He lorded it over everybody, and called us names. He'd say things like 'Hey, you farmers, you don't know anything.' He made me so mad," Vasily even clenched his teeth.

"What was wrong with him, he crazy or something?" Peter asked. And then he remembered Nikolai.

"I don't know. It takes all kinds. He told us we smelled like manure. But everything he stuffs in his mouth was grown in that manure! He would have died of hunger long ago if it weren't for farmers. It even got so bad that the collective farm chairman got involved. He called his mother in. After that they were out of here in a flash. And you haven't even really seen our village. That's my fault."

"Why are you taking all the blame? You weren't the only one. Tell me instead why you wanted to see me?" Peter looked searchingly at Vasily.

"You probably thought we would beat you up, right?" he laughed amiably. "Tell me the truth."

"If you want the truth, then yes, I did."

"I would have thought the same thing if I were in your place," Vasily said softly. "I feel bad. I was wrong. I thought you were different. I bet you won't want to be friends with me now, right? Tell me the truth."

"Why not!" Peter said.

"We gave you a difficult test, and you passed it with flying colors. But you should have climbed in the boat. And then when the other kids were laughing..."

"That's enough about that. We'll forget it," Peter interrupted.

"Shake on it?" Vasily brightened, and held out his strong, brown hand.

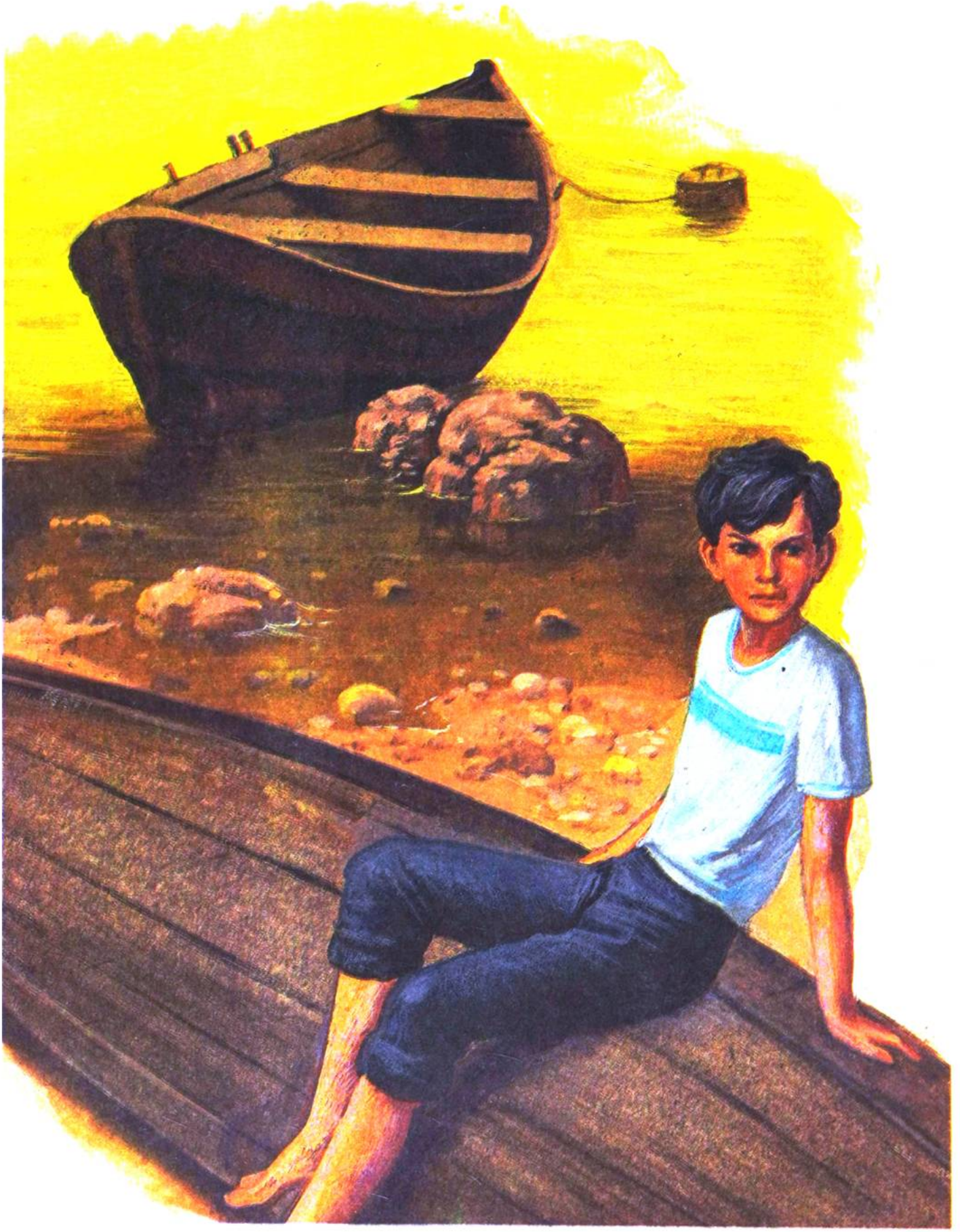
"Sure!" Peter yelled, holding out his own. "Lord, you're the witness. Give us your paw, too."

GRANDMA VERA

It was Vasily's flower day. That was what the kids called watering the flowers in the school greenhouse, the flowerbeds in front of the houses of military men, invalids and soldiers who had died in the war, and around the monument to villagers who never returned from World War II. There were many families which had lost their loved ones, and so Vasily walked back and forth through the village carrying two pails filled with water.

Peter followed with a watering can, panting and trying not to fall behind Vasily. He liked pouring from the can, but his arms and shoulders ached.

The flowerbeds were full of pansies, marigolds and petunias. Nasturtium bloomed, covering the walls of the houses up to the windowsills with red and orange flowers. The snapdragons



and asters were bursting with buds. Peter was surprised. Aster is an autumn flower and it wasn't even July. But Vasily cleared up his bewilderment.

"We plant seedlings early. First seeds are planted in boxes during the winter, and when the shoots appear we bring them to the school greenhouse. It has a brick oven. The entire class takes turns keeping it going. And the greenhouse was built by students. A teacher helped and the collective farm donated the materials. The agronomist is a big help too: he gets seeds and shows us what kinds of fertilizer to use and how much. And tells us how we should care for the seedlings."

As he followed Vasily, Peter kept looking around, studying the village. Several houses had garages for cars and there were television and radio antennas on almost all the roofs. It was a Sunday evening and well-dressed young people strolled along the streets. An accordion sounded, someone was playing a guitar, and several fellows were listening to transistor radios. A light-haired girl was dancing, while glancing coquettishly at the balalaika player.

Finally they reached the monument to the villagers killed in World War II. It was a simple, two-meter high pyramid made of wood and painted red. A red, five-pointed star was on top. On the side of the monument was the inscription: "Eternal glory to the heroes who fell defending their homeland." The letters were small and hard to see, made of plywood and painted bronze. To make up for it the ground around the monument was covered with pansies. There were all colors of the rainbow! No man-made carpet could compare with that creation of nature.

Peter bent over to look at the flowers. In one spot some kind of funny face looked at him slyly. In another there was a long face with a surprised look. There was even a flower of purple velvet with a yellow eye in the center. A white flower, like a bride's dress. And yellow ones, and lilac, and blue and multicolored.

"You like it?" Vasily grinned. "The older school kids made

it," he said, pointing to the monument. "And we planted the flowers. Great, isn't it?"

"Uh-huh." Peter nodded, not wanting to offend him. The monument was modest compared to those in the city. And they had picked a bad spot — right across from the club which was a long, two-story brick building with a roof of tin. Two columns supported the garret and the section of the second floor which jutted out. The massive doors with huge bronze handles were partially made of glass.

You could tell the club was recently built. Vasily told him the opening was scheduled for the following Sunday. Now they were finishing the decorative work. The children were anxiously awaiting the opening. The entire second floor was to be for school groups. Their interests were varied: one wanted to learn photography, another to study music. Some wanted to act in plays, or build models, or learn to box, while others wanted to study agrotechnics. It was hard to list all the different desires.

They had just finished watering the flowers around the monument when a tall, elderly woman in a dark dress approached the club building. She looked at the monument attentively, then at the boys, and sighed for some reason.

"How are you, Waterlily?"

Vasily's face boke into a smile.

"Fine, Grandma Vera!" he answered. "Couldn't be better. Look how pretty they are," he said, indicating the pansies.

"You say it couldn't be better," Grandma Vera said pensively, and walking over to him, she held her finger to her lips. She thought for a moment and her face grew very serious. Deep wrinkles appeared between her eyebrows. Pushing a grey strand of hair back under her white kerchief, she looked at the club.

"Listen, Waterlily," and she placed her hand on his shoulder. "I have an idea. Will you help?"

"Of course!" Vasily even smiled. "You know I'd never say no."

"That's good," Grandma Vera said softly.

 "What's your idea?" Vasily asked eagerly.

"I won't tell you anything right now. We'll see later..."

She turned, waved goodbye to the boys, and slowly walked toward her house.

"What's that about?" Peter asked.

"I don't know," Vasily said, shrugging his shoulders.

"She's strange. Talked a lot about nothing and then left," Peter said with a smile. "Who is she, your relative?"

Vasily shook his head.

"And she called you a funny name..."

"Don't laugh," Vasily stopped him. "That's our Grandma Vera. All the kids love her. Her whole family was killed during the war: her husband and her two sons. She doesn't have any relatives here. Her family moved here just before the war. She didn't go back to where she came from after the war because she said she wanted to die in the place where her husband and sons left to go to war. So she lives by herself. And I don't mind if she calls me Waterlily. She says children are the flowers of life. Gorky wrote that. And that's why she calls me Vasily-Waterlily. She told me she's loved that flower since she was a little girl. She called her son that."

"So he was Vasily?"

"Uh-huh. And the other was Nikolai. I'd sure like to know what Grandma Vera has thought up. She said if she needs me she'll ask for help. What do you think?" Vasily looked at Peter questioningly. "Will you help too?"

"Are you kidding? Only maybe I can't."

"Hah! She never gives work we can't do."

GRANDMA VERA'S PLAN

Several days went by, yet Grandma Vera was silent. When Vasily again asked what he could do to help, she only patted him on the shoulder and answered pensively: "Do you know the saying 'look before you leap'? Well, I'm looking now. I'm thinking everything over."

"She may end up thinking for another year or two," Peter said later. "I'll already have been in Moscow for ages. Let's not wait for her, and go deep into the forest, like we planned."

"O. K., let's," Vasily agreed readily. "But today I'd like to go to the opening of the club. First thing tomorrow we'll head for the forest! I know my way around, so you don't have to worry. We won't get lost. My Dad and I go there all the time. But we won't take any of the others. Just the two of us will go."

The club was full of people dressed in their Sunday best. A band that had come from town was playing, and the chandeliers shone brightly. Distinguished members of the collective farm, guests, and district representatives sat on the stage at a table covered with red cloth.

The boys found a place next to the exit. It wasn't that interesting for them to listen to the speeches: they were anxiously awaiting the actors, and silently urged the speakers to finish.

Finally, the chairman of the collective farm rose and looked gaily around the overcrowded hall.

"Well, dear friends," he said loudly. "The ceremonial part is over. But don't go away! After a break we'll have performances by actors, both those from the city and our own."

The hall broke into applause.

"Wait just one minute!" the chairman said. "Maybe someone else here has something he wants to say."

"Everybody has said everything already," Dimitry whispered happily, jabbing Peter and Vasily, who were sitting next to him, in the ribs.

"What more is there to say, everything's been said!" a voice was heard.

"That's right... Of course, that's enough... What else could anyone add?" people shouted in support from different parts of the hall.

Then a tall woman stood up.

"It's Grandma Vera," Vasily said, and he leaped up on his chair.

"No, I don't think everything has been said," she said firmly. "Allow me, Chairman."

"Go ahead, Vera Petrovna," the chairman hurried her.

"I'll come up on stage," she continued. "I don't want to talk just to the presidium, but to the people here, to the residents of our village."

"Please do," the chairman said, a little worried about what the elderly woman would say. He motioned her to come forward.

Grandma Vera slowly stepped up on the stage, as if repeating her speech mentally. She sighed deeply, and adjusted her white kerchief. The hall grew quiet in expectation.

"Dear fellow villagers!" she began with emotion. "Today we are celebrating. We are opening a big, fine, beautiful club, one that we never even dreamed of years ago. Like cars, and televisions and schools, and much, much more. And we have done all this with our own hands. I am only very sorry that those heroes who gave their lives or their health so we could live to see these wonderful days aren't with us. Some of those who fell lie in foreign lands, or here at home but in places unknown to us..." Grandma Vera's voice shook, and she stopped to wipe her eyes with the corner of her kerchief. Then she continued in a broken voice: "But we did not mention them today! And the monument to those who fell looks very plain in front of a fine club like this. Though we are grateful to the children for doing that much. It seems to me we aren't so poor now, and it is a sin to leave the monument looking like that."

The hall buzzed in confusion. The chairman rose, and was about to speak, but Grandma Vera stopped him with a gesture.

"Wait, Stepan Egorych! Let me finish. I have waited for this moment for many years. I know what you'll say: we don't have the money. Of course, it's needed for important farm needs. I know. We need a great deal. But the monument is the most needed, sacred thing right now. We are obliged to pay our debt in full to those who sacrificed their lives. And

raise our children to remember them. Look around the village. Show me a home where there isn't someone missing, be it grandfather, husband, son, father, brother, wife or daughter who did not return. I don't think you'll find many homes like that."

"What do you suggest, Vera Petrovna?" a woman asked, wiping tears from her eyes.

"This," Vera Petrovna said, holding up her savings book, which she then placed on the table in front of Stepan Egorych. "This is my little contribution to the future..."

The hall became alive, and voices shouted:

"She's right! What kind of a monument is that?"

"Good for you, Vera Petrovna! We should erect a better one."

An invalid on crutches slowly rose from the first row and shouted in a strained voice:

"Stepan Egorych, get a piece of paper. We'll make a list of contributors to the monument!"

Then a young woman leaped up.

"Grandma Vera, don't be foolish," she said heatedly. "Take back your savings book. You are all alone! You'll need that money in your old age. You don't have anyone to take care of you, no children or grandchildren."

"What do you mean, no one," Grandma Vera smiled bitterly. "My grandchildren are over there. See how many I have?" and she pointed to the children sitting near the door.

Vasily's heart burst with pride. And Peter felt happy for him, and even a little for himself.

"Come on, let's make a list!" people demanded. "Chairman, do you hear?"

Stepan Egorych glanced at the guests worriedly, and began looking for some paper. The entire schedule was ruined. And there were the actors. "Oh, Vera Petrovna, you done it to me this time," he grumbled gently to himself. "Why couldn't you have warned me, you Good Samaritan."

"Don't be in such a rush, Stepan Egorych," Grandma Vera smiled, as if reading his thoughts. "We won't spoil the day.

It won't take much time to make a list. Vasily," she called. "Come up here."

Vasily jumped up and ran toward the stage, smoothing his hair as he went.

"Here is one of my grandchildren," she said solemnly. "It doesn't matter that we have different last names. Let's ask the children to collect signatures. Their legs are fast and their hearts are in the right place. We'll ask them to run through the whole village with a list, and whoever wants to can contribute to the sacred cause. We won't force anyone. The bookkeeper can take care of formalities. Do you agree, my dear friends?"

"Right! We agree!" and dozens of hands shot up.

The chairman rang the bell, trying to calm the hall.

Grandma Vera and Vasily returned to their seats. And then, the gallery woke up: unexpectedly for the adults, the young people and children filling it began to shout rhythmically: "Thank-you, thank-you, thank-you..."

Wild applause broke out.

Grandma Vera was moved, and tears shone in her eyes. She calmed herself, took Vasily's small, strong hand, and squeezed it. He responded with a happy, powerful squeeze.

"Let's go, Grandma Vera," he said proudly, as if taking the woman under his protection. "You shouldn't get upset."

At that moment Stepan Egorych announced a break. But the people did not leave, and busily discussed Grandma Vera's initiative. Suddenly an unfamiliar young man stopped Grandma Vera and Vasily as they walked toward the other children.

"Vera Petrovna, excuse me. Could you come with me for a moment? I would like to talk to you," the stranger asked softly.

Grandma Vera looked at him in surprise, and still holding on to Vasily's hand, answered just as softly:

"All right, let's go."

When Vasily came back in, he did not tell the others anything, but merely whispered: "Military secret, shhhh! I can't divulge it." And there was a mysterious look on his face.

A NEW CALAMITY

The day was just dawning, but Peter was already awake. "Darn, I bet I overslept," he thought.

He tiptoed over to his mother's bed and peeked at her watch: 4:30. That meant he hadn't overslept. Vasily was supposed to come at five. Peter stretched happily, yawned, washed up quickly, and went to the kitchen for the basket. A note lay on top of it: "Peter, have a good breakfast before you leave. I left it on the table under the towel. Mama."

He pulled off the towel: a whole mountain of little pies lay on the plate next to a pitcher of milk. "Great! When did she find time to do that?" Peter whispered, touched. "Ah, Mama, Mama."

He heard a whistle outside. Afraid to waken his mother, he crept up to the window silently, like a cat, and stuck his hand outside. The whistling stopped. That meant Vasily noticed. He went outside and motioned to his friend.

"Come and see what Mama left us," he whispered, winking slyly, as he led Vasily by the hand into the kitchen. "See?"

"I already ate," Vasily said, shaking his head.

"Come on! Dig in!" Peter said, ignoring him and pouring two glasses of milk. "Best pies you can get. Smell." He held one under Vasily's nose.

And they smelled so delicious that Vasily couldn't help himself, and sunk his teeth into the food.

"Only eat faster," he said with his mouth full. "Or we will be too late, and all the berries will be gone before we get there."

"Really?" Peter said. He grabbed the plate and dumped all the pies into the basket.

"Are you crazy?" Vasily said in surprise. "What are we going to do with all of those?"

"Don't worry. Once we're out in the fresh air they'll disappear in no time. Let's go."

Lord, lying on the floor next to them, immediately leaped to his feet. His eyes shone.

"Back!" Peter hissed, raising his hand. "Stay!"

The dog obeyed grudgingly, looking at Vasily hostilely.

They walked out the gate and headed for the river.

"Did you bring everything we talked about?" Vasily asked.

"Yes. A lighter, and a knife, and a compass."

"Why the compass?"

"Just in case. It might come in handy."

"Well, all right," Vasily smiled. "Let's hurry. I'll steer the boat myself."

Soon they had the boat into the water. They loaded the baskets and an extra oar that Vasily had brought, climbed in themselves, and pushed off from the bank.

"Gosh, look how smooth the river is," Peter said, and he put his hand over the side. "It's great to be out in a boat in this weather. But it's probably not so nice when there are waves, right?"

"You can say that again! It all depends on one's mood. Sometimes you go along and it shines like a mirror. It's a pity to disturb the water with your oar so you go very slowly. But sometimes the wind whips around and the waves even have whitecaps." Vasily screwed up his eyes and frowned. "The boat bobs up and down like a stick. You can't believe how it rocks back and forth! And I stand up straight in the stern, and row as hard as I can. The boat's nose bounces up in the air and the waves crash against it. Foam and spray splash everywhere, and the wind whistles in my ears. I shout back. Boy, it's great!"

"And you're not afraid?" Peter asked doubtfully.

"Nah! You know, there are times when you aren't afraid of anything. Pemember when you swam the river? And then another time there isn't really anything to be afraid of, but you get scared, right?"

"Yes," Peter nodded. "You walk along the street thinking, and a car's breaks squeal in the distance, and your heart leaps into your throat. Then sometimes you feel you could face up to any danger."

"That's when your courage builds up, and you aren't afraid of anything."

"Of course, courage is a great thing," Peter said, inspired. "Look at the great generals before a battle. They always raise their soldiers' spirits. I saw the film about Alexander Suvorov on television. Remember, they were at the Chertov Pass. His troops were tired and depressed. Suvorov realized they didn't have the strength to go into battle. They didn't want to. Their spirits were low. Even though they really loved Suvorov. So he began to joke around. Inspiring them and giving them courage. And the soldiers went into battle! And later there were other crossings, even more horrible."

"That's true," Vasily said. "If you don't believe in yourself, you can't do anything. Too bad I didn't see that film."

"You will," Peter assured him.

"See that little cabin over there?" Vasily pointed. "That's where the forester, Uncle Ignat, and the hunters stay. And sometimes the fish and game wardens get together there. Uncle Ignat is one."

"That's probably when they're after poachers."

"Uh-huh. We'll stop here."

Vasily steered the boat to the bank.

"This spot is safe. But sometimes you run into a sandbar that runs halfway across tne river. You walk along and the water only comes up to your knees, and then suddenly, whoops! A drop off."

"Come on!"

"No, really. I'm telling the truth. The story's been told by old men. Though it happened a long time ago. We have a place like that on the river. Six kids went out on it. They were goofing around and grabbed a hold of each other's hands and went running along. They were laughing and running when one of them disappeared under the water. He was holding another kid's hand and that kid gripped his neighbor's even tighter. And so they all went down, one after the other to the bottom. They all drowned."

"Oh, how awful!" Peter exclaimed. "Wasn't there anybody around?"

"There were, but what could they do?" Vasily sighed. "They began to yell and search for them, but they never found their bodies. Not one of them!"

"What happened to all of them?" Peter whispered in fright. "I can't believe they couldn't find at least one."

"No, they didn't. They say there are dangerous places on that bank. Places where it is washed out underneath, like a cave. They think the current pulled the kids down into one of them. There weren't any divers then. I'll show you the place. Don't swim there."

"Don't forget to show me, or I could go out on it and be sucked under."

"And what did you think? Sometimes it's worse on the bank than in the middle of the river. At least there you know it's deep. But on the bank it seems shallow and then you take a step and your feet suddenly don't touch bottom. A hole."

"Wow! That's really something," Peter muttered, and remembered his father's words: "Don't be a coward, but don't take unnecessary chances... The river is unfamiliar..."

"We're here," Vasily said. He jumped in the water and strained to push the boat up on the bank. The sand crunched and the boat came to rest on the beach.

They unloaded it, pulled it up on dry land, and fastened it to one of the stakes sticking up on the bank. Then they noticed smoke coming from the chimney of the cabin.

"Uncle Ignat is home," Vasily stated businesslike, sniffing the air. "We should go in and see him."

"Why?" Peter asked. "We're in a hurry."

"We have to," Vasily explained. "Accidents can happen. We should let him know we're here. We're going into the forest, after all."

"But you said you know the way and we wouldn't get lost."

"So what if I know," Vasily said. "There's a rule: you always let the forester know you're going. Come on."

He picked up the oars and his basket, and walked toward the house. Peter followed unwillingly.

"He was the one who kept rushing me, and now he's wasting time. Maybe he was just bragging that he knows the way," Peter thought, and he looked distrustfully at Vasily.

"Are you mad or something?" Vasily asked in surprise.

"No, just hurry," Peter answered.

"Uncle Ignat! Are you home?" Vasily called opening the door. "Can we come in?"

"Oh, it's you, Vasily!" the forester called, continuing to weave a sweep net. "Come in, what are you standing there for?"

They entered the house.

"Hello," Peter said.

Hearing an unfamiliar voice, the forester lifted his head.

"Who'd you bring with you, Vasily? Doesn't look like anyone from these parts."

"This is Peter, my friend. He's from Moscow."

"Ahhh, a Muscovite," Uncle Ignat said respectfully. "So tell me, Mr. Muscovite, how do you like it here?" He winked merrily at Peter. "I bet you don't have such terrible old men walking the streets of Moscow." Uncle Ignat shook his head and smiled.

Peter saw a short, stocky old man with a reddish beard and laughing eyes.

"Why do you say you're so terrible?" he asked, puzzled. "Your face isn't at all frightening, but friendly."

"Yes, we are like that. We live the simple life," the forester said, and again winked playfully at Peter. "You picked a good friend in Vasily. He's a fine fellow."

"That's enough, Uncle Ignat. What are you showering me with praise for," Vasily said, displeased. "Sometimes it's worse to praise somebody than to run him down."

"Hey, don't get edgy."

"Can we leave our boat here?" Vasily asked, still frowning, changing the subject. "We fastened it to one of the stakes."

"If you fastened it, then why are you asking?" the forester

smiled. "Of course you can leave it. Going to pick berries?"

"Uh-huh," Vasily answered gloomily, embarrassed by the forester's comment.

"Well, go on then. Go on."

Vasily was about to leave, when Peter poked him in the ribs:

"Offer him some pies."

"Is that O. K.?" Vasily started.

"What a silly question."

"Uncle Ignat, help yourself to our pies," Vasily said, and handed him the basket.

"Pies, you said?" the old man asked as he sniffed the air. "They sure do smell good. I won't refuse. Only you'll want them later."

"You ought to see how many my mother made for us. Please, take some," Peter said, pleadingly.

"Well, if you ask like that, fine, I'll eat a few."

"Please do!"

"All right, but you have some tea with me then. I don't heat my tea kettle with gas, but over the fire. It smells of smoke, but that's no crime."

"You're right, Uncle Ignat," Peter agreed. "It's even better over a fire."

"We don't have time, Uncle Ignat," Vasily said, refusing the offer. "We need to get going or all the berries will be gone."

"All right, go ahead then," the forester smiled. "But be sure to stop by on the way back. I'll feed you fresh fish soup. I bet you never ate fresh fish right from the river," he turned to Peter.

"No, I never did."

"After tasting my delicious soup, you'll never forget me. Well, get going, or you'll be late."

They hurried to the door. The forester stood up and went outside, watching to see which direction they took. Uncle Ignat knew every one of the raspberries patches.

The sun climbed higher. Vasily looked at Peter who was lagging behind.

"We should get back home before the heat of the day," he said anxiously. "Hurry it up."

"Is it a lot farther to go to the raspberry patches?"

"No, we're almost there," Vasily answered. "You tired?"

"No, I'm just tired of carrying a basket full of food. Maybe we should get rid of it, huh? Otherwise there'll be no place to put the raspberries," Peter said, laughing, and yanked up his pants.

"You should say straight out that you're starving instead of going on about the basket being heavy. Let's eat while we walk to save time."

"Hey!" Peter suddenly said mysteriously. "What if we hide the food in a tree so we won't have to carry it? That would be great! Then no wild animals will get it."

"Why don't we? That's a great idea! Let's run to that tree over there."

They stopped in the shade of a thick, branchy oak. After putting aside half the pies, Peter wrapped the rest, muttering grumpily: "Why did she have to make so many? I'll tell her not to do that again. It's somehow embarrassing." Meanwhile, Vasily walked around the oak, searching for the best way to climb up. Finally, he shouted to Peter that he had found a way. He took off his belt, slipped it through the bundle of pies, tossed it over his shoulder, and took the free end of the belt in his teeth. Then he began to scramble up the tree. He climbed well, you could see by his nimble movements.

"That's far enough, Vasily," Peter shouted.

"Step back and take a look. Can you see it?" Vasily answered seriously, and he sat down on a thick branch.

Peter ran to one side and began giving orders:

"Move it to the right! That's it. A little more. O. K. Good! You can't see it at all. Climb down!"

But Vasily continued to fiddle around in the tree, hiding the bundle with leaves.

"That's enough," Peter said, growing angry. "You'll fall."

"No, I won't," Vasily said and began to climb down.

Peter divided up what was left over, and put half in Vasily's basket and half in his own. Then he hung the canteen with water over his shoulder. "I'm ready. Let's go."

Eating pies on the way, they ran toward the raspberry patch which they could see from the tree. Peter immediately began to stuff himself with ripe, red berries.

"The first berry goes in the mouth. Oh, it's juicy, delicious, wonderful..."

"That's right," Vasily said, smiling. "You'd do better to keep talking."

"What do you mean?" Peter asked, looking at his friend in surprise.

"When your mouth is busy, you'll pick more berries, otherwise you'll go home with an empty basket. No berries, no jam, no pie," he added.

Peter glanced into Vasily's basket and his eyes popped out:

"How do you do that? You use two hands?"

"What did you think? I work like a machine."

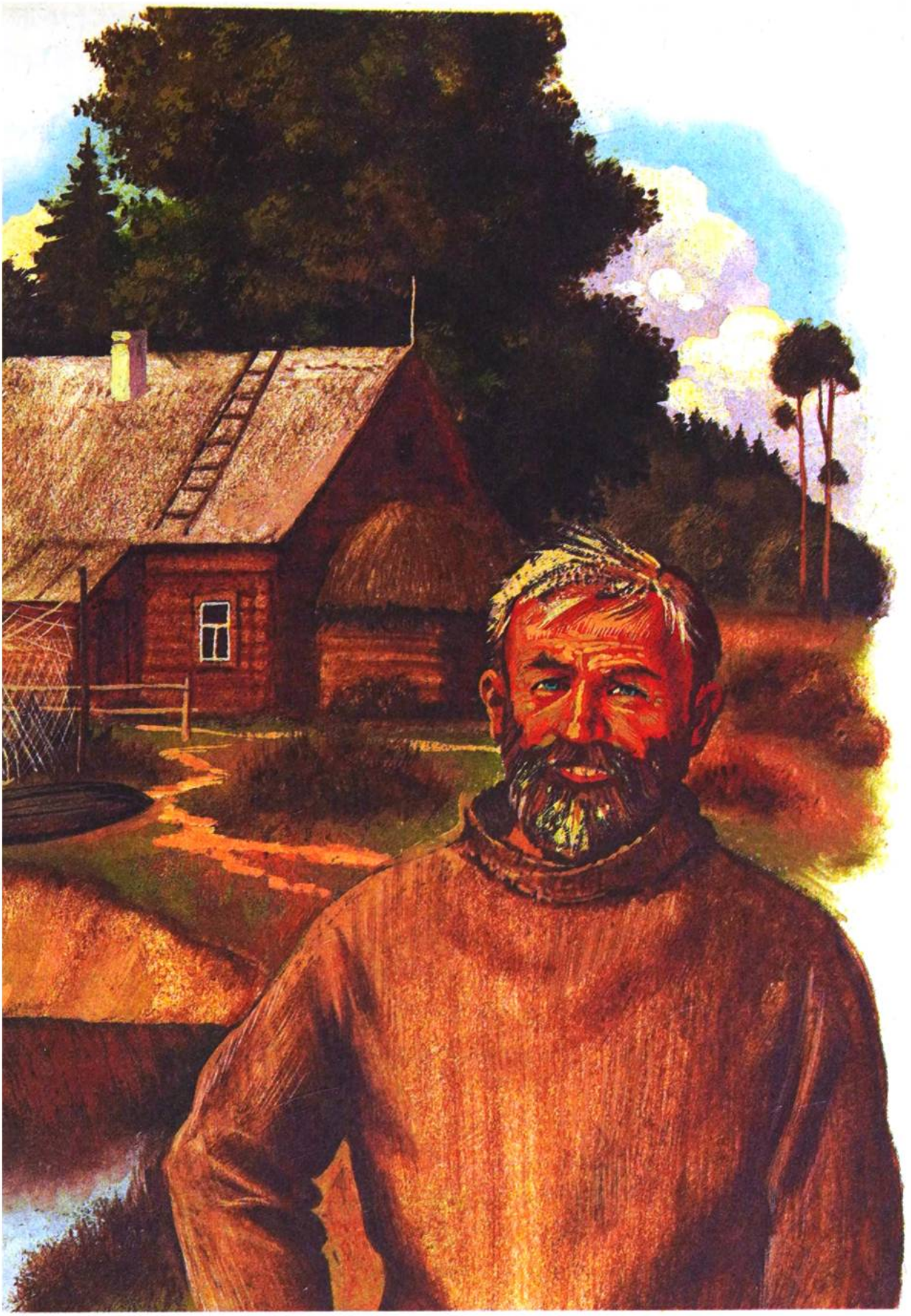
And only then did Peter notice that Vasily's basket was hanging around his neck on a string, and that he was picking berries with both hands. And doing it very quickly.

"That's really something!" he said, delighted. He took off his belt, fastened it around the handle of his basket, and put it over his head. But no matter how he tried, he picked berries slower with two hands than with one. The belt rubbed his neck and made him hot and uncomfortable.

"Forget the raspberries," he muttered, taking off the basket. "I need a break."

"I don't like that," Vasily said, frowning. "First finish what you started, and then rest. Pick a few more, and then I'll help you. You don't want to walk through the village with an empty basket."

"That's no big deal! I'll put some leaves on the bottom and lay the berries on top, and the basket will be full."



"Aren't you sneaky!" Vasily said, grinning ironically.

"There's nothing sneaky about it. I always do that when I go pick mushrooms."

"What's the sense in doing that? It's just for looks since you end up taking the same amount of mushrooms home anyway."

"Yes, but when people see the basket their mouths water, and they don't see what lies beneath."

Vasily looked at him in astonishment and was silent. "He's probably pulling my leg," he thought.

Peter picked a few more berries, and then stood up and put his hands on the small of his back.

"After this who wants raspberries," he muttered.

"What did you think? That they come for free? That they jump in your basket by themselves?"

"You're right," Peter nodded, rubbing his aching back. "They don't cost money, but they sure make you pay."

"Finished! Mine is full!" Vasily said solemnly and took the basket from around his neck. "Now let's finish filling yours."

"No!" Peter said angrily. "I've picked as many as I'm going to. We have plenty as it is. Let's fight instead. One, two, three!" and he threw himself on Vasily.

The attack was so unexpected that Vasily almost fell over. He wasn't going to allow himself to be beaten, but not knowing the strength of his opponent, and not wanting to offend Peter with a quick victory, he initially did no more than increase his resistance, standing with his feet planted firmly on the ground. Then he whispered: "Hey, you're all right," and began to fight back. The struggle took on a stubborn character, with each using his own tricks.

"No fair tripping," Peter shouted, holding on to Vasily even tighter and trying to lift him.

But Vasily did not give in, and both of them tumbled into the bushes. Yet they still did not let go. Huffing and puffing, they rolled around in the underbush, bending the tall grass to the ground. The snap of twigs cooled their ardor for an

instant and they both started and pressed against one another.

"What was that?" they both thought.

And suddenly, right in front of them, a large hare leaped out of the bushes, stared at them with panic-stricken eyes, circled and then raced away headlong. He ran so fast it looked as if he were flying through the air.

Peter came to his senses first:

"Hey, you, long-ears! We're after you! Run, run, run!" he shouted, leaping to his feet and clapping his hands.

"The devil! Scared me to death!" Vasily said, releasing his breath. He was red from the heat.

"Frightened by a hare," Peter laughed like a madman, holding his stomach. "Real brave guys..."

"If we'd known it was a hare, we wouldn't have gotten scared," Vasily muttered unhappily, also rising. "He jumped out so fast."

"What did you want him to do, warn you first? Should he have raised his paw and asked permission: Please, dear Vasily, let me jump out."

"Don't be silly," Vasily said, laughing too.

It was very hot. A faint, infrequent breeze blew, cooling off their overheated bodies, and perspiration stung their hands which were scratched from the berry bushes.

"It's time to go home," Vasily said, looking at the sun which was high in the sky.

"Hurrah!" Peter shouted at the top of his lungs.

His voice echoed through the woods. A frightened bird took wing, and a lizard scurried across their path. That hare probably ran even faster.

"What are you trying to do, scare the whole forest?" Vasily said. "Why don't we go over to that field and rest. After that we'll head for home."

"Let's go. Gosh, is it pretty!" Peter said, admiring the rye waving in the wind.

"It's nothing now," Vasily said. "You should see it when it's ripe. Like gold."

They lay on the ground in the shade of the swaying rye.

"This is great!" Peter said, stretching blissfully. "Especially after your raspberries."

"Does that mean you won't go anymore? Lost interest?" Vasily asked, looking at him searchingly.

"What do you think I am, a weakling or something?" Peter said, offended. He turned aside and began chewing furiously on a blade of grass.

"Must be hungry if you're chewing on grass," Vasily laughed. "Why don't I run back to the oak for the pies?"

And he leaped up and disappeared into the bushes. Three minutes later he called merrily to Peter from the tree.

"Come and get it!"

Peter's mood was ruined. He stood up unwillingly and went to get the bundle that Vasily had lowered down on his belt. Peter put it down on the ground, and slowly walked away, not even opening it.

"Where are you going?" Vasily asked in astonishment.

"Not far. Unwrap the bundle while I'm gone," Peter answered dryly, not looking back. He examined his surroundings carefully.

"He probably ate too many raspberries," Vasily decided, and not waiting for Peter, he sat down in the grass and began to untie the bundle.

"Who does he think he is to laugh at me," Peter excited himself. "He was the one who invited me to the forest, and now he thinks he can do anything he wants." He noticed a ditch in front of him. "We'll see which one of us is brave and strong!" And he rushed toward it intending to jump across. It did not seem very wide or deep.

"Peter! Are you going to be finished soon?" he heard Vasily call.

"Yeeees!" he answered, and he jumped. He cleared the ditch, but fell on a stump, with sharp edges covered with green moss, that was sticking up out of the grass. The first few seconds he felt no pain. He was only annoyed that he had not been able

to jump as he wanted. But as soon as he tried to get up, it felt like dozens of steel claws were digging into his leg. Forcing himself not to cry out, he lay down in the grass next to the stump and saw blood pouring out of his leg. He yanked up his torn pant leg, and pressed tightly on the wound with both hands. That did not help.

„Vasi-i-i-ily-y-y!" he wailed.

"Where've you disappeared? Did you find something?" his friend answered happily, and ran skipping to Peter. When he saw his hands covered with blood, he froze and his eyes opened wide in fright.

"Be right back!" Vasily said, coming to his senses, and he raced to the oak.

"What did he leave for?" Peter thought, grimacing with pain. "He should have stayed and helped. A pool of blood formed near his leg, and he was terrified. "If only Mama were here," he thought, and almost began to cry.

"I'm coming!" he finally heard Vasily call.

When he reached Peter he quickly opened the canteen and poured water on some leaves. Noticing the bloody pool, Vasily paled, but he quickly placed the leaves on Peter's knee, yanked off his shirt, and began to rip it in strips before Peter realized what was happening.

"What are you doing?" he said, frightened.

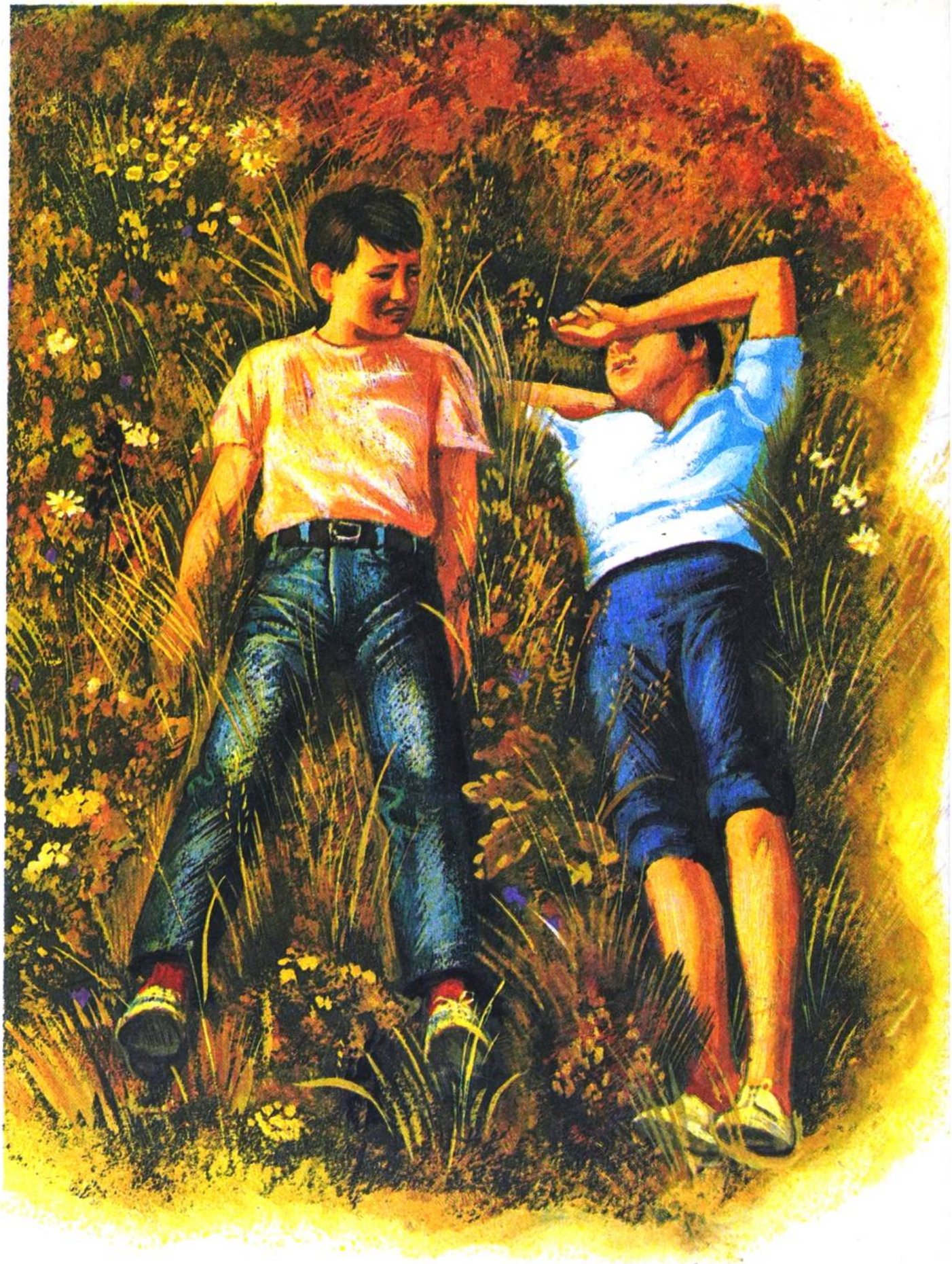
Vasily did not answer — he was too busy. He put the leaves on the wound, and began to dress Peter's leg tightly with the strips of his shirt.

"Ouch! Be more careful!" Peter moaned, wiping the tears from his eyes with his fist.

"Hold on a bit longer, I'm almost finished," Vasily said reassuringly. "Do you think I feel good about this? Just a little more and it will be better. The main thing is to stop the bleeding."

The blood began to soak through the material, and Vasily tried to bind the wound even tighter. After he finished, he sighed in distress.

"So, what made you come over here?" he said reproachfully.



"Some long jumper! And now what are we going to do?"

Peter bit his lip and remained silent, since there was nothing he could say.

Vasily thought for a minute and then spoke:

"You have something to eat, while I'm away. It's not far. You can't walk yourself, that's for sure. I'll get there real quick, and Uncle Ignat and I will figure something out."

He pushed the canteen and pies closer to Peter, clapped him on the shoulder in a friendly way, leaped to his feet, winked encouragingly, and grabbing the baskets of berries, ran off.

"Where are you going?" Peter shouted, trying to get up.

"Stay put!" Vasily called from afar. "Don't worry, I won't leave you."

And Vasily disappeared from sight. It grew quiet. There was no one around. Peter felt abandoned in the middle of an unfamiliar forest. "The sun is scorching! It's a good thing I have a canteen of water, at least," he thought sadly. "What if Vasily doesn't come back? No, he wouldn't do that. But how long have I known him — only a few days. And think of all the nasty things he did to me. But then we made up. We gave our word we would be friends. All kinds of awful things come into your head." In order to take his mind off such thoughts, Peter began to look around. A beetle was crawling up the trunk of a birch tree, and an ant was hurrying home carrying something. "Lucky stiffs," he thought enviously. "And I'm stuck here. What if a bad guy suddenly comes out of the forest? Or a wild animal? Then what'll I do?"

Minutes passed, but Vasily still did not return. "That means he lied," Peter thought, feeling doomed. "Could he really leave me? I'll wait a little longer. Maybe he'll come."

But time dragged on slowly, as if on purpose, and Peter's nerves felt stretched to the breaking point. He began to listen to every little rustle and snap. A tiny branch fell from a tree, and he started. "No, this is too much. I'll take the rest of the food, find a stick and hobble back. But first I'll count to one thousand and if Vasily hasn't come that means he betrayed

me. Them I'll leave." And he began to count. He got to five hundred and Vasily still had not come.

He wrapped up the food, hung the bundle on his belt, found a stick and began to get up slowly. It really hurt, and it seemed he would never stand up. However he forced himself to his feet. "But where should I go? What direction should I take? Stupid, I didn't pay attention as we walked here. Next time I'll be smarter," he scolded himself.

He tried to recall the route they had taken from the forester's. After long thought, he turned to the right with a determined air. But before he had gone three steps, Vasily came out of the bushes.

"Stop, where are you going?" he shouted. Peter looked back.

Ferspiration streamed down Vasily's flushed face, and his black hair was plastered against his forehead and hung in his eyes, but he did not notice it. He had hurried.

Peter sat down on the ground grumpily.

"What were you doing?" Vasily said with reproach, wiping away the perspiration with his hand. "Couldn't wait? That means you don't trust me! Why, Peter? I didn't think you were like that."

Peter felt uncomfortable and ashamed, and blushed as red as a lobster in boiling water. Not looking Vasily in the eye, he muttered hollowly:

"What do you mean, I don't trust you? I was just getting everything together so we could go as soon as you got back. See, everything is ready."

Vasily pretended to believe him and sighed in relief:

"Well, if that's the case, then good. Because it is terrible not to trust one another. Look!" he said. "See what I made for you. Just like a real crutch, don't you think? At first everything went wrong. Uncle Ignat wasn't at home, he's probably gone fishing. Remember he promised us fish soup? So I had to do it all by myself. Made it from an oar."

"Let me try it," Peter said. "Great! Just like a real crutch. And I'm like a wounded soldier," he tried to laugh. "Let's go

slowly. Clutching the makeshift crutch under one arm and holding on to Vasily with the other, he began to walk. He stopped every once in a while to catch his breath and to wipe the perspiration from his forehead.

"It really hurts, doesn't it?" Vasily asked sympathetically. "Here, let me hold your leg."

"You'll carry my leg like a bride's train," Peter even laughed. "No, thanks, you don't have to," he said, and squeezed Vasily's arm tightly.

The figure of Uncle Ignat appeared on the road in the distance.

"Hey, lads, what are you dawdling there for?" he shouted. "Hurry up, the soup's ready!"

"We're in trouble, Uncle Ignat," Vasily answered.

"Trouble?" the forester repeated, worried. "I'm coming, lads." And the old man hurried toward them.

"Let's rest," Peter said, pointing to a large stump.

"O. K.," Vasily said, bustling to help him sit down.

"Did you break your leg, son?" the forester asked anxiously, when he reached them.

"No, he only cut it deeply," Vasily answered for his friend.

"Well, that's nothing," Uncle Ignat said. "There is a good doctor's assistant in the village. He'll have you back on your feet in no time. Here, put your arms around my neck and I'll carry you, son."

"Oh, no, Uncle Ignat, I'm too heavy," Peter protested.

"Hold your tongue," the forester said. "In the war I carried even heavier guys from the battleground on my shoulders. Hey, you're pale, my lad," and he wiped Peter's face with his rough hand and ran it over his hair. "Hang on, son." He picked Peter up, and the boy wrapped his arms around the old man's neck and held on tightly.

Soon they could see the cabin.

Uncle Ignat gently put Peter down near the stove on the wooden trestle-bed which smelled pleasantly of fresh hay.

"It's no feather bed," Uncle Ignat said. "But I like it. We

live the simple life. And do you notice how good the hay smells?"

"Yes," Peter nodded.

"So, you rest here, and I'll go help Vasily bring in the soup."

The forester left and Peter began to look around the room. The bright sun coming through two small windows was soft and homey. Two trestle-beds stood along the side walls, and a table and two stools were under the windows. Fishing tackle and clothes hung on hooks near the door. A little further along the wall was a bench and a small cupboard where dishes and food supplies were kept. The doors were partly open and Peter could see what was inside. A kerosene lantern stood on the bench.

"Well, how are you, son?" Uncle Ignat asked as he entered. He was carrying a steaming, blackened pot. The fresh fish soup smelled delicious. The forester got an aluminum cup out of the cupboard and filled it with soup. Then he cut a piece of black bread, picked up a wooden spoon, and carried them to Peter.

"Dig in, son. I'm a good cook, and you'll feel better soon," the forester winked at him encouragingly. "Well, what are you staring at the spoon for? Not used to that kind? It is better than any other, my friend. Won't burn your tongue on it."

"Thank you," Peter said, moved.

"Here we say thanks afterwards. Eat first," the forester said. He walked over to the window, picked up a stool and carried it to the table. "Come over here, Vasily," he invited. "We'll eat the soup right from the pot, like fishermen."

They began to eat.

"Uncle Ignat, can I bring my Dad to visit you when he comes?" Peter asked.

"Sure. I'm always glad to see people. It gets boring here all by myself."

"Peter, stop talking and eat faster. We need to leave soon!" Vasily said, burning his tongue on the hot soup.

"All right," Peter answered, and picked up his spoon.

When he finished, the forester took the empty pot, bent over the bed, and commanded jokingly: "Well, my lad, mount

your horse!" And Peter put his arms around his neck.

"Vasily, don't forget your berries," he said. "And arrange the seat comfortably. Lay some hay under his foot so it will be softer."

"O. K., I know," Vasily said, and hurried to carry out the order.

The forester carefully carried the unlucky berry picker to the boat. He waded out up to his knees and gently sat Peter down on the seat.

"Well, head out. Have a safe trip. Come back when you can. Stop in. Vasily, you run and tell your father. Have him get a horse from the farm and go around to the bank. Don't need to upset the leg."

"Don't worry, we'll do everything."

"Hump, don't worry," the forester muttered. "Still a young whippersnapper and his head is full of air." He pushed the boat off.

"Thank you very, very much!" Peter called. He wanted to say more but he couldn't. He only thought: "He's really nice."

The sun touched the horizon. It began to get dark. They had to hurry, and Vasily rowed with all his might. The boat cut easily through the water, like a bird flying through the sky. Mosquitoes buzzed around them and their bites were painful.

"You nasty little buggers!" Vasily grumbled, slapping his neck.

Only then did Peter realize that Vasily did not have a shirt: it had been used as a bandage. "You're some fellow," he thought warmly. "Look at all the troubles you've had because of me."

"What are you thinking about?" Vasily called out to him. "We're almost there. I'll run to the office and get a horse. And I'll have the doctor's assistant here in no time. Or are you afraid your Mom will yell at you?"

"No, she won't yell. She'll just be upset."

Finally they could see the landing. Two people were sitting on boats on the bank.

"Probably Mama and Annushka," Peter said. "See, they're pointing at us."

"That's not Annushka! The person's in pants. It's a man, but he's not from around here."

"Pe-e-e-ter!" someone called from the bank.

"Yes, it's us!" he shouted back.

"Maybe that's your father."

"Yes, sure!" Peter laughed bitterly.

And suddenly, a familiar voice carried over the river:

"Hey, Pe-e-e-ter!"

"Dad!" he shouted, and was about to leap up and wave to his father, but Vasily held him back.

"Be careful, you'll hurt your leg and upset the boat."

And he began to work the oar even faster. They could hear Lord's welcoming bark.

The boat hit the sand. Peter's Dad pulled it ashore and Peter found himself in his father's embrace.

"Be careful, his leg," Vasily said, embarrassed.

"What happened to his leg?" his father asked in alarm.

"Nothing much, just cut it," Peter said, but he grimaced from the pain.

"What happened, Peter?" his mother paled and hurried over to her son. "What's wrong, Pavel?" she asked his father.

"Calm down," his father said.

He picked up Peter's crutch and examined it.

"Vasily made it," Peter said, nodding at Vasily.

"Well done," his father said approvingly. "Good for you."

Vasily blushed, and muttered in embarrassment:

"I'll go about the horse, and I'll get the doctor's assistant too."

"Why a horse?" Peter's father asked in surprise. "I'll carry him myself. And I want to thank you, Vasily. Let me shake your hand. Now we are officially acquainted. Why don't you secure the boat?"

Vasily did as told.

"Hurry, Pavel, we need to get him to the doctor right

away," his mother urged nervously.

"Your Vasily seems like a fine boy," Peter's father said as he walked toward the hill, looking back at Vasily who was taking care of the boat.

"He's great!" Peter exclaimed, and he hurriedly told his father about everything: how he landed wrong when he jumped the ditch, how Vasily bandaged his leg, how Uncle Ignat carried him to the cabin, and how they ate fish soup. Peter was excited, and jumped from one subject to another. He told how Vasily made a crutch, and had to go off somewhere to do it and did not return for a long time, and he thought he had been abandoned in the forest. No longer able to control his emotions, he suddenly pressed against his father tightly, and wiped the tear-stained cheek against his shoulder. He had gone through too much that day, and the cut leg was hurting him. But even so he felt better now. Dad, and Mama, and Vasily were closeby: the people he loved. And Vasily had become a part of him. And there was Uncle Ignat.

"Dad," he suddenly remembered. "When my leg heals, you and I have to go fishing with Uncle Ignat! And hunting with Vasily and his father. O. K.? Boy, it's great that you've come!"

"That's better, you've brightened up," his father said, smiling. "Of course, we'll go. But you don't ever have to lose heart. You're a man, right?"

"Not yet, I guess," Peter said, trying to form a contrite smile.

UNEXPECTED NEWS

During the next few days Vasily often came to see Peter, but he did not stay long: he and Dimitry were keeping their promise to Grandma Vera and going to see all the villagers with a donations list. Almost everyone enthusiastically supported her initiative, and the sum for erecting a new monument was growing rapidly.

The day came when Vasily could share the "military secret with his friend. It turned out that the young man who had talked with Grandma Vera after the meeting was an architect. He had come to the village on his vacation to visit friends. Grandma Vera's initiative and her passionate appeal to the villagers had touched him, and he had decided to contribute to the noble cause. He was now working on the future monument, and had made several rough sketches. Though many thought it strange, he constantly sought Grandma Vera's advice. Vasily promised to show Peter his drawings and plans.

"As soon as your leg heals we'll go see the architect. I've already made friends with him," Vasily said proudly.

The bandages were finally removed from Peter's leg, and he shouted the news to his father, who was approaching the house after going for a swim.

"Hurrah! No more bandages! I can walk. That means we can go see Uncle Ignat tomorrow. Right, Dad?"

"Fine," his father said happily. "But you need to tell Vasily. Well, come on, show me your leg. Apparently that doctor's assistant knows his business. It healed quickly."

No sooner had Peter rolled up his pant leg, than someone knocked loudly at the window.

"Who could that be?" his father asked.

"I don't know," Peter said, shrugging his shoulders.

The knock came again. Then they heard a girl's ringing voice:

"Are the Kruglovs staying here? There's a telegram from Moscow."

Peter's father walked over to the window and flung it open.

"I'm Kruglov."

"Sign here, please," the girl said in a businesslike manner, though her fresh pretty face shone with joy.

Peter's father signed, nodded to the girl, and opened the telegram as he walked back to the table. Peter scrambled up on a chair and read over his father's shoulder: "You must return. Take vacation later. Kryuchkov."

"Rats! Just what I thought. They never give you a chance to rest," he wailed.

"Stop that, Peter," his father said sternly. "They wouldn't send for me unless there was a good reason. It means they need me. And apparently it's important. I didn't want to come right now myself but they suggested it. Said I was tired. And now they want me back." His father frowned and drummed his fingers on the table. "Don't tell me I erred in the calculations! No, it must be something else. I was sure we'd checked everything out to the minutest detail. Yes, I'll have to go, and as quickly as possible."

"Where are you going?" Peter's mother asked in surprise as she walked into the room.

"Unfortunately, I have to return. Here, read the telegram."

"For goodness sake!" she exclaimed. "You no sooner get here and they call you back."

"Don't be angry," he told his wife, looking at her uneasily as he paced the room. "Get my things ready to leave, please. I must go."

"But wait, how are you intending to go?"

"What do you mean, how? Oh, that's right, the boat. When does it leave? Annushka!" he shouted out the window. "What time does the boat leave for Moscow?"

Annushka put the pail of weeds down and fixed her fallen kerchief. Then she looked at her watch, and at Peter's father's worried face.

"It's already left today. The next one isn't until tomorrow at nine in the evening," she answered.

"Oh no, that can't be!" he exclaimed. "I need to leave immediately." And he shook his head sadly.

"There is nothing you can do," Annushka said comfortingly. "The boat has its schedule."

"How absurd it all is," he muttered, pacing the room nervously. Then he stopped near his wife, and put his hand on her shoulder.

 "Maria, please go down to the pier and make sure," he

asked gently. "Maybe something will leave later. How absurd!" he said, and waved his hand in annoyance.

"Calm down, Pavel! You don't know for sure what's happened at work and you're already in a panic. Don't get upset, please."

"How can I not get upset? You know how many sleepless nights went into the calculations for that project. We checked and rechecked everything..."

"I understand perfectly well," she said, and left hurriedly.

His father sat down slowly on a chair, and put his head in his hands.

Peter felt sorry for him. He had never seen his father like that before. He was used to him being gay and happy. He now sat in front of Peter unrecognizable, old. Peter walked over to him, and looked him in the eye.

"Don't worry, Dad. They made a mistake. Got mixed up in the telegram. You're a man," Peter added, recalling his father's phrase. "Don't lose heart. You said so yourself."

His father lifted his head and smiled.

"You're right, Peter. Never lose heart."

"Mr. Kruglov! Mr. Kruglov! There are another two telegrams for you, and both are urgent! One is from the government! Forgive me, I peeked," the girl's voice again rang out.

"Where? Please give them to me at once!" His father leaped to his feet and hurried to the window. "Thank you." He took the telegrams, and opened them nervously.

The girl smiled, showing her even, pearly-white teeth.

"You awarded Government commendation," his father read. And Peter again saw him deflate: he closed his eyes, bent over the table, and held his head in his hands.

"What's the matter, Dad? What happened?" Peter asked in fright.

"Nothing, nothing, son," his father muttered, opening the second telegram.

"Everything fine. Awaiting you to send machine to destination. Preliminary test positive. Congratulations. Come quickly. Kryuchkov."

After reading the telegram, Peter's father covered his face with his hands.

"What are you doing? Crying? Give him a glass of water!"

Peter looked back: the girl was still standing at the window.

"You should be celebrating, why don't you," the girl said, displeased.

Peter's father gave a deep sigh, and then laughed merrily.

"He's gone crazy with happiness," the girl said aloud, and hurried off down the street.

Peter's father leaped up and shouted laughingly after her:

"You're right! I have gone crazy with happiness."

Then he turned to Peter and spoke seriously:

"If you only knew what I lived through those few minutes I sat in that chair. I thought I had failed. Thought that I had missed something. And we had already reported to the government! Announced that the project was completed. And suddenly such a disgrace! You can understand. And then those telegrams with their good news. Apparently everything is fine. We now have a new machine."

His face seemed to grow younger, and his eyes shone with inspiration. He lay his hand on Peter's shoulder. "Study, son!" he said with feeling. "Study so you will not make mistakes. So your life will count for something, and you will make a worthwhile contribution. So you can feel both anxiety and happiness at such moments."

Peter's mother entered the room and tried to catch her breath:

"Pavel, there isn't any boat going today," she announced from the doorway. "The earliest is tomorrow. Maybe we can find a car going that way."

"No need to, Maria," his father said happily. "Read these."

She quickly ran her eyes over the telegrams and embraced her husband.

"Congratulations!"

"Thank you, Maria," he said, touched. "I've really driven you. Sit down and catch your breath."

His wife stroked his cheek gently:

"I'm very proud of you. And Peter, take your father as an example. Make us proud of you, too."

"I know, Mama, I know!" Peter said. "I already know what I have to do when I grow up. But now we should celebrate."

"You are right!" his father said delighted. "Come on, Maria. Find us something good to eat."

Peter's mother hurried to the kitchen.

Suddenly they heard the sound of a drum and some kind of banging outside. Peter ran to the window in surprise.

"Dad! Come here, quick. Look!"

Tanned little boys and girls walked down the street, led by marching musicians. The band consisted of two toy drums and two tin cups hanging from around the boys' necks. They beat on them furiously with wooden spoons. They were playing a melody no one knew. Ivan walked to one side of the procession, repeating seriously: Hup, two, three, four. Hup, two, three, four...

"What wonderful children!" Peter's father said, as he looked over his son's shoulder.

"That's Ivan, their chief," Peter proudly told his father. "He's a real smart little kid. He met Mama and me at the pier and brought us here."

The procession reached their house.

"Hup, two, three, halt!" Ivan commanded. And the barefoot children stood still.

Ivan cleared his throat, saluted, and looking important, walked up to the window and shouted to Peter's father:

"Congratulations from all the kids!"

Then he did an aboutface, and marched back to the group.

Peter and his father were taken aback. Then, without a word to one another, they both jumped over the windowsill and onto the ground.

"A salute!" Ivan ordered. "In honor of the government's thanks. Hurrah!"

"Hurrah!" the two dozen children shouted all together.

"How did you know about that?" Peter's father asked Ivan.

"We heard the postwoman talking to you, and then she told other people too," Ivan explained. "We have a game. It's called 'Be concerned'. That's why we came."

"Oh, I see," Peter's father said, smiling. And raising his arm, he also shouted hurrah.

"Hurrah!" the children shouted again, not understanding what it was all about. They yelled so loudly that the chickens flew off in different directions and a cat tore through the yard in fright.

Peter's father held out his hand to Ivan.

"Well, let's get acquainted, Chief."

Ivan laughed with pride and energetically shook the large hand.

"Thank you, boys and girls. You are very fine children," he said to the procession, touched. "Peter, run and tell Mama to fix a treat," he said. "Have her put out all the candy she can find. We are going to have a feast. And I invite your entire platoon," he said to Ivan.

"Yes, sir," the little boy answered, and saluted again. Then he turned to his troops.

"Hey, kids, after me! Hup, two, three, four!" and the procession marched into the yard.

Peter's mother and Annushka stood on the porch smiling.

"We heard everything," his mother said, when Peter ran up. "Bring in the guests."

His father was terribly pleased, and seemed to radiate happiness.

"Maria, those are amazing guests," he said. "What a wonderful surprise! The children are simply magnificent!"

Peter's mother offered them candy, raspberry jam made from the berries Peter picked, rolls and tea. There weren't enough cups and Annushka brought out hers, but even then two of the guests had to drink tea from a plate with spoons. But that really didn't matter.

"My house has never seen a day like this one and probably never will again," Annushka said, happy and sad at the same

time. She looked at the children tenderly and thoughtfully. "We don't have any children." And she sighed deeply.

"What do you mean?" Peter's mother said. "Dimitry won't forget you when he grows up."

"Anything can happen," Annushka said softly. "In our time, anything can happen. And loneliness is a terrible thing, Maria."

"I agree with you," Peter's mother said just as softly.

Peter was worried because Vasily hadn't come to see him in so long. "I hope nothing has happened," he thought. Peter did not know that Vasily's mother was ill. He wanted to go see him, but it would hurt his father's feelings if he left at that moment. He thought for a second, and then whispered in Ivan's ear: "I have a job for you. I need to get a letter to Vasily right away. No matter where he is, search him out and bring back an answer. Got that?"

"Yes, sir," Ivan rapped out. "Give me the letter. I'll send Sasha."

Sasha ran as hard as he could, proud to be chosen for the important errand. When he reached the gate to Vasily's house, he shouted: "Vasily! Vasily! I've got something for you!"

Vasily's perspiring face appeared in the doorway of the cow shed. He was cleaning out the pens.

"What happened?" he asked, waving away a troublesome fly.

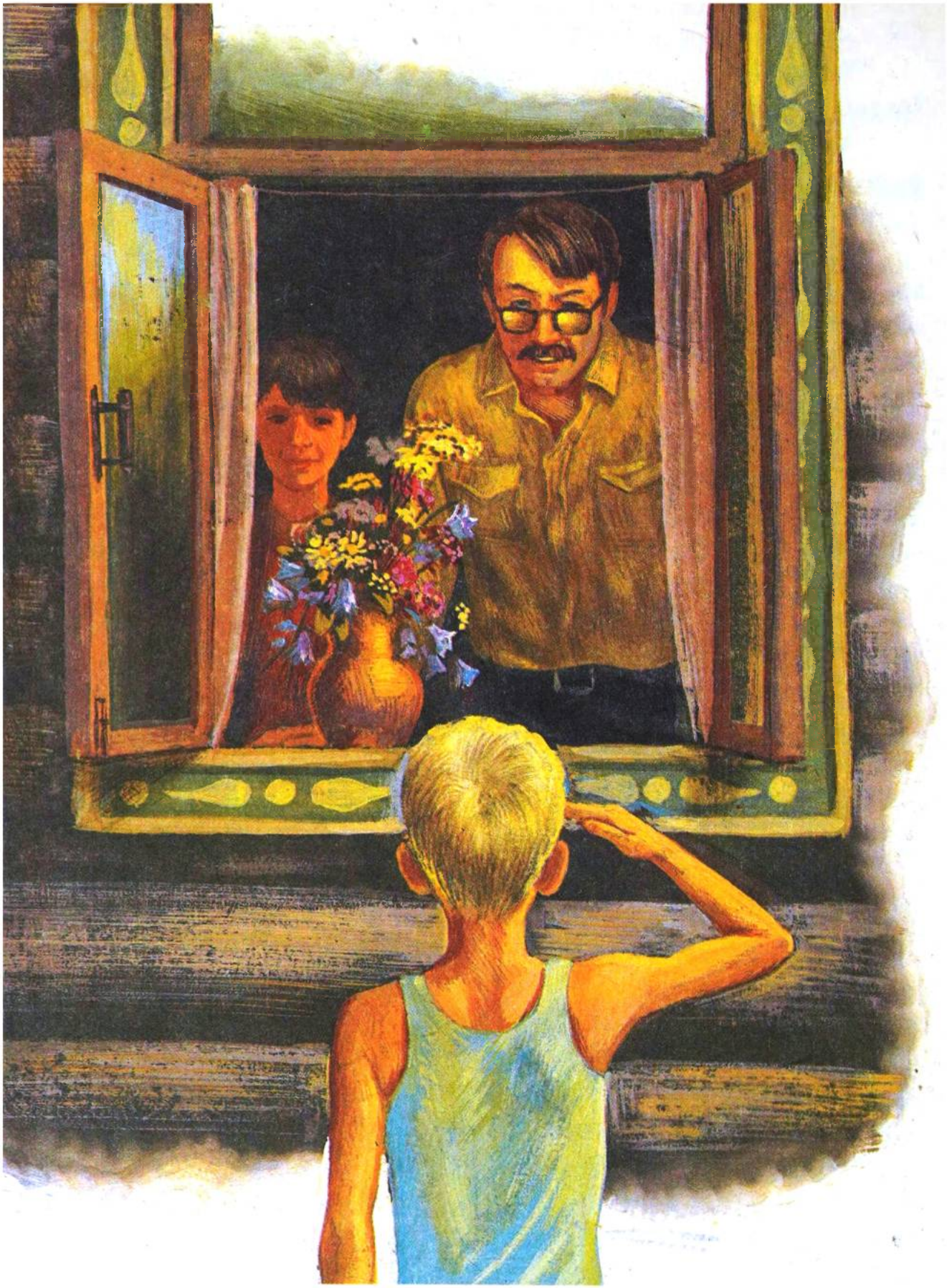
"Nothing. I brought you a letter from Peter. I need an answer," Sasha said hurriedly, and he handed the letter to Vasily who had walked over to the gate.

"What do you know! That's great!" Vasily shouted, after reading Peter's note.

"Well, give me your answer, hurry!" Sasha urged him.

"What answer? There's no time to write. Tell him I'll be right there. Go, on the double! I'll just be a second."

Vasily put on a clean shirt, combed his hair, and started off for Annushka's house. But he did not walk fast: his head churned with conflicting thoughts. One moment he was glad for Peter that he had such a father, another he was wondering



what that "new machine" was, and finally he remembered that Peter would leave soon, and he felt sad. There were so many things they'd planned and hadn't done. They hadn't gone fishing with Uncle Ignat, they hadn't gone hunting with Peter's father, and he hadn't introduced Peter to the architect. Peter wouldn't even know what the monument would look like. And in general, it would feel empty without his new friend. They were already used to one another. But Vasily did not have time to sort out his feelings and thoughts: he could hear noise, laughter and shouts coming from the yard. He quickened his pace, and saw Ivan dancing in the middle of a circle of adults and children.

Ivan noticed him too. As soon as Vasily entered the yard, he stopped and came to attention.

"Why did you stop? Go ahead and dance," Vasily said, embarrassed, and he began to clap for Ivan like the others.

"Why are you standing there?" Peter's father said laughing, drawing him into the circle. A few seconds later he was dancing with Ivan.

At first Vasily was ill at ease, then he began to have fun. It was so nice to see Peter's father so happy that he couldn't contain himself any longer. He spread his arms out and ran around the circle. Vasily snapped his fingers and danced furiously, performing unheard of movements.

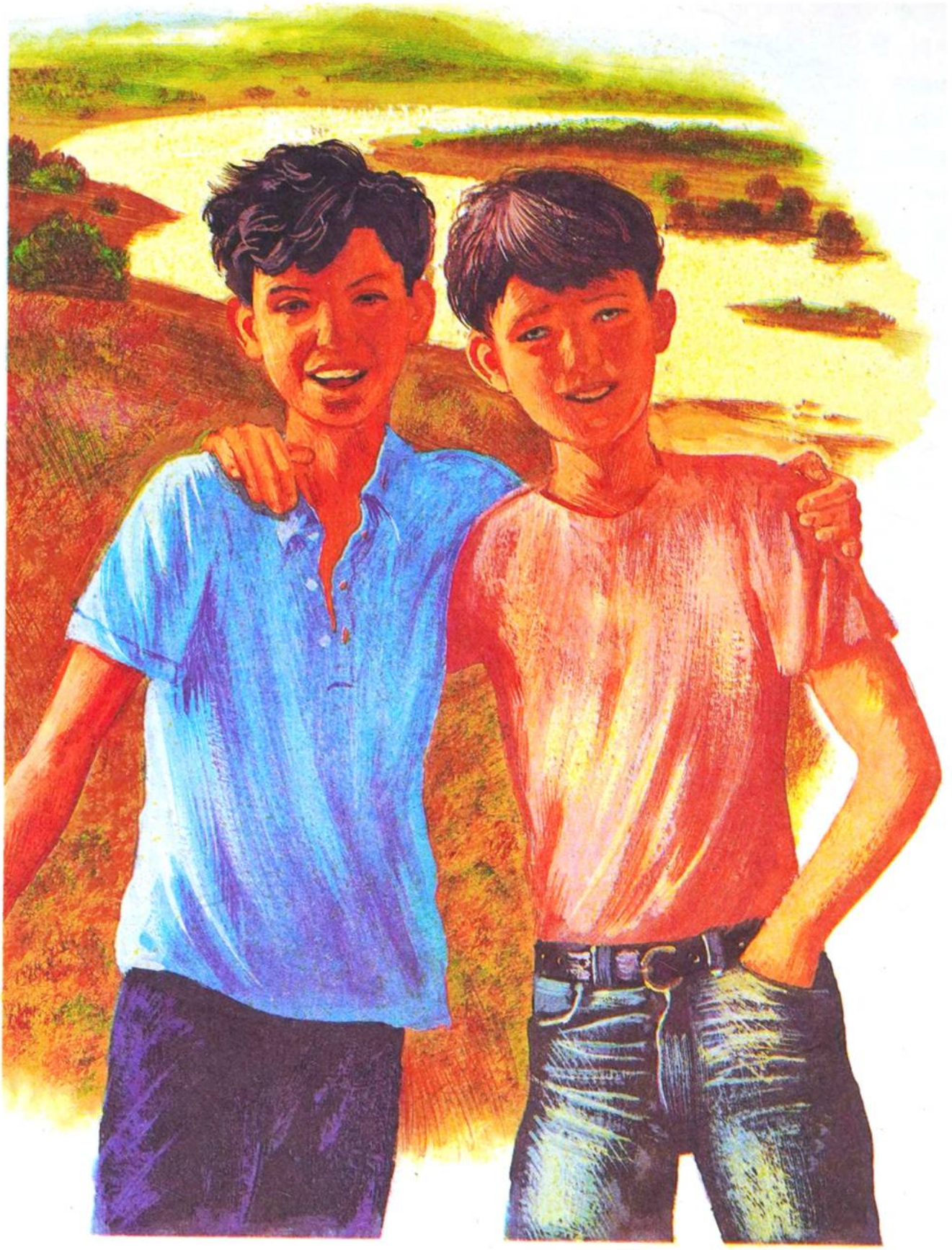
Everyone froze in astonishment. No one had ever seen Vasily dance so merrily.

"Come on, Vasily!" Peter shouted encouragingly, tapping his foot and clapping his hands. He wasn't a very good dancer, but he loved to watch others dance.

Finally, Vasily left the circle, out of breath.

"You sure are light on your feet," Peter's father said, and gave him a friendly slap on the shoulder. "Well, friends, it's time to call it a day. You have run me real ragged. Thank you all, again."

The guests began to leave, talking excitedly about the unexpected party. The only ones left in the yard were Vasily,



Peter and his father.

"You know, Vasily," Peter said, distressed, "not all our plans will work out. My Dad is leaving for Moscow. Tomorrow."

"You're leaving? Oh, how awful!" Vasily moaned, and his face reflected a complex range of emotions. The clearest was sadness. "It's like I saw it all before, when I was walking here. I was thinking about our plans, too. And now they're all ruined."

"Don't worry," Peter's father said, reassuringly. "We'll come next year."

"For sure?" Vasily asked, brightening a little.

"I give you my word," Pavel Nikolaevich said seriously. "I have really enjoyed myself in your village. You are all wonderful kids."

"O. K. I believe you," Vasily said. "But remember, you gave your word." And he raised his finger meaningfully.

Peter smiled happily, looking at Vasily and then at his father. He was proud of them both. And he was sure the friendship with Vasily was going to be a long one. It would last all through their school years and vacations. And maybe longer, who could say for sure? They still had a lot to do and all kinds of plans to carry out.

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